

## REVOCS Insurgency - Part 2 of Symbiosis

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/19156774) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/19156774>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a>
Categories:	<a href="#">F/F</a> , <a href="#">F/M</a> , <a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Kill la Kill (Anime &amp; Manga)</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Kiryuuin Satsuki/Matoi Ryuuko</a> , <a href="#">Jakuzure Nonon/Sanageyama Uzu</a> , <a href="#">Hououmaru Rei/Matoi Ryuuko</a> , <a href="#">Gamagoori Ira/Mankanshoku Mako</a> , <a href="#">Inumuta Houka/Iori Shirou</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Matoi Ryuuko</a> , <a href="#">Kiryuuin Satsuki</a> , <a href="#">Jakuzure Nonon</a> , <a href="#">Mankanshoku Mako</a> , <a href="#">Sanageyama Uzu</a> , <a href="#">Gamagoori Ira</a> , <a href="#">Hououmaru Rei</a> , <a href="#">Iori Shirou</a> , <a href="#">Inumuta Houka</a> , <a href="#">Mankanshoku Matarou</a> , <a href="#">Kiryuuin Ragyo</a> , <a href="#">Senketsu (Kill la Kill)</a> , <a href="#">Mikisugi Aikou</a> , <a href="#">Kinagase Tsumugu</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Weird Plot Shit</a> , <a href="#">Post-Canon</a> , <a href="#">Canon-Typical Violence</a> , <a href="#">Original Character(s)</a> , <a href="#">Blood and Gore</a> , <a href="#">Action &amp; Romance</a> , <a href="#">Science Fiction</a> , <a href="#">If you've read part one you know the drill</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of <a href="#">Symbiosis, or The Post-Canon Continuation of Kill la Kill No-one Asked For</a>
Stats:	Published: 2019-07-17 Updated: 2024-03-04 Words: 622,129 Chapters: 108/?

# REVOCS Insurgency - Part 2 of Symbiosis

by [Enhydra\\_lutris](#)

## Summary

The deranged cultists of REVOCS are back, and with four Kamui of unprecedented power at their helm they threaten everything our heroes have built. Can the newly founded Kamui Corps defeat them before they complete their scorched-earth mission for our planet? Can Ryuko and Satsuki unravel the mystery of their continued connection to Ragyo, and each other? Can Nonon prove herself a capable leader of the Kamui Corps? Can Mataro prove himself a worthy addition to their ranks? Will Shiro realize his vision of immortality through the hybrid project? All that and more in this installment of Symbiosis - where we might actually find out what the name means!

If you haven't read part one, this will not make much sense without it. You have been warned. I'm told it's pretty good though, so y'know, you might try it.

# Monday From Hell: Storming your own castle

## Chapter Summary

First real story part! It's part of a "multipart chapter" so it's short but should be followed up tomorrow and so on (mostly because I'm still finishing/editing the later parts of this chapter). Hope you enjoy!

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October 2066

~~~~~

If Ira Gamagoori had said he was entirely disappointed with the way the morning was going, he would have been lying. The smoke and the rubble and the sounds of battle held no fear for him, especially now, when even in her powered down form Tekketsu was more than capable of protecting him from stray bullets that shot out from the gloom pouring out of the huge doors before him. Beyond that it was a maze of corridors, and nobody who'd gone in had come back. Better to spare the men, surround and siege them out.

Especially considering what was in there. What was *leading* them. He'd much rather have that thing out in the open.

*[I'm sorry about your prison.]* Tekketsu said in her silky telepathic voice. They were well acquainted enough by now that she knew it wasn't the building itself, but his men and the reformation project he was attempting on the prisoners that he was concerned for. Not like the main structure was going anywhere, it was reinforced concrete carved into a hill on the Tokyo outskirts, solid as the bedrock itself. *[Two years of work down the drain, huh?]*

"Well, not quite," Ira answered, his voice stern – if it were anyone but her this kind of casual conversation wouldn't be permitted at a time like this. He interrupted himself to issue a command, "Second squad, form a perimeter on the breach in the eastern wall and post sentry for any sign of the enemy. If you see the commander, fall back and report to me."

"Sir!" The captain of a squad of soldiers in DTRs – the new kind that didn't leave your legs hanging out the back end – shouted back in affirmative. They broke off from the group stomping in Ira's trail and vanished into the smoke. The sound of their whirring servos vanished not long after they did into the general chaos.

*[Not quite?]* Tekketsu asked when they were gone.

"Well, now we get to see if those two years were worth anything."

*[Yes the prisoners...]* She trailed off in thought. *[Well what would you do if one of those monsters was in front of you, spit in its face?]*

“Well, I would. Them?” He wasn’t so sure about that. Takamori, oh no, he was definitely a lost cause. They’d never gotten even close to deprogramming him, hell, how do you deprogram the programmer? The assassins that had tried to kill Ryuko in her bedroom weren’t going to resist either, they were disciplined, hadn’t even talked once. The prisoners Nonon had taken in the base raid? That was a tossup - he was pretty sure some of them had been deprogrammed, but when their lives were threatened that probably didn’t mean much.

And that just left Itsuki. The first one, the one who Ira was *sure* he’d fully converted to the light. How many days had Ira sat playing chess or cards or go with him, having totally normal conversations with him that almost made Ira forget where they were? How many stories about his past life, before he joined REVOCS, had Itsuki shared? And he was even the one who revealed the location of the base! Ira tried his best to treat him how Mako would’ve treated him (besides all the hugging, that would’ve been weird). What would he tell her if that hadn’t been enough? He wouldn’t cave. Right?

But if he didn’t, they’d probably just gut him on the spot...

*[Well, I guess I’m not especially optimistic either. But look on the bright side – it’s not like you wanted to be a prison warden forever].* Things were dying down in there. An uncomfortable silence was filling the air. Behind him a large steel barricade protected soldiers who didn’t have the dodging speed of DTRs. They shuffled nervously, pointing needle guns downrange. The DTRs meanwhile whirled and hummed, ready to leap into the fray at a moment’s notice.

“No, I suppose not.” But what was there for him to do now? It looked like it was back to full time soldiering now. At least Nonon and Uzu seemed excited about that. And, despite her sympathetic tone, Ira knew Tekketsu was too. Battle was what she was meant for, she could feel it on an instinctive level. The eagerness to get to grips with a powerful foe nearly infected him too.

*[They’re coming!]* Tekketsu said in a hushed whisper *[I can feel them!]*

Ira held up a hand, and the men behind him froze. He could feel them too, and then he could see them. The entire main entrance was filled with vague silhouettes, watching them from within the billowing smoke. And the one in the middle, the slender woman with the horns in her long hair and the great rounded pauldrons, that was *her*.

Ira and Tekketsu decided as one that now was the time to power up. When Junketsu was in control of Ryuko she’d had no interest in honor or holding back. Ira clenched his upraised fist, pushing his Seki Tekko – a pin in the palm of his glove – deep into a vein. He got a chance to see Tekketsu’s chainmail fill with solid red like a twisty straw before she exploded off of his burly frame, a vast serpentine shape of fire, draconic horns twisting high above his head. He looked up to admire that vast creature with a satisfied smile – a little embarrassing, if anyone could see, but his soldiers could barely even look at him for all the brilliant, brassy light that flew from his body. Tekketsu was about to collapse back up on top of him, but she suddenly froze.

*[Look out!]*

Something large and flat and metallic was hurtling through the air towards them. One of the twenty-foot-tall steel doors to the prison’s main gate, flung like a frisbee. Ira instinctively held out a hand, and Tekketsu surged down towards it, just in time.

Gigantic, curling fingers snatched the door effortlessly, serrated talons that glinted black and blue sunk into the steel as effortlessly as with a sponge. It felt good to crumple the metal so easily – this



was how strong they were meant to be, as though some great invisible chains had fallen loose around them.

The rest of Tekketsu's flaming, draconic shape was too vast and luminous to long maintain itself in this world. She wrapped around Ira, carving a new landscape of hulking metal in the shape of muscle. The sword in Ira's right hand, which had just moments ago felt ridiculously long and imbalanced, now hung perfectly in his hand. He could feel the indignation surge through her, drawing his face into a grimace.

**"Life Fiber Synchronize! Kamui Tekketsu!"** He shouted, and Tekketsu shouted not moments behind him.

*[Interrupt my transformation will you! Now its really on!]* Usually so unruffled, Tekketsu had just realized how ruthless this foe really was. And that pricked a nerve.

The Kamui straightened itself imperceptibly, and Tekketsu suddenly radiated agitation, *[Oh shit, I think it **heard** that!]*

"No matter. You're right though, now it's time to do our job."

The Kamui stepped from the smoke. The white fabric, traced through with those glowing red lines that squeezed and embalmed its host, the great glaring eyes, that was all about what Ira expected. Now that Tekketsu could see it she crawled with discomfort, something like an "uncanny valley" effect at seeing this thing that looked and felt similar to her but just... not quite right.

That was all what Ira was prepared for, but the woman underneath, she was more interesting. That couldn't be Minazuki Kiryuin, Satsuki's older cousin, right? But it was!

"Oh hell, that's not good," Ira muttered fairly pointlessly as he stared at that face – so similar to Satsuki's, blond hair aside. And the phalanx of one-star Ultima uniforms armed with bulky assault rifles behind her, that wasn't good either. Nor were the other prisoners behind them, all also armed and ready to fight their way to freedom. Takamori grinned viciously. He clearly felt on top of the world. But Ira was too busy thinking about how disappointed Satsuki would be until he saw Itsuki in the back and his heart sunk.

Itsuki saw him too – really how could he miss a ten foot hulk of a man – and quickly turned away in... fear? Shame? Disgust? Ira couldn't tell. But it didn't matter.

No, Ira wasn't completely disappointed with how this morning was going. But that didn't mean he wasn't still absolutely livid. He pointed his sword at the monster that shouldn't be, and she stared back at him serene and unruffled as he bellowed:

**"NOT ONE STEP FURTHER, REVOCS SCUM!"**

## Chapter End Notes

So I have no solid idea how I'm gonna do upload schedule for this part, and like the last I'll probably mostly improvise and end up with a chaotic mess. Doing "multipart chapters" a bit more gracefully than before seems like the best idea so I can write continuously rather than

going on a two or so day writing bender then recouping for the rest of the week. So far what I'm gonna do is split sections (especially action heavy ones like this one) into parts so none is too long and I can write more continuously. So this might not seem very long but with what I have now I'm gonna probably have another one tomorrow, and the day after, and so on until the ones under the "Monday from Hell" heading are done. And then on to the next.

Overall I'm still gonna try and get done with one "multipart chapter" roughly every week. I dunno, I'll play it by ear.

# Recap and a long reference page about combat mechanics

## Chapter Summary

This isn't an actual chapter but a sort of intro/appendix like the second chapter of the first part. I am currently working on the first actual chapter, but it needs to be good and I got this done on the plane so I will probably drop that tomorrow or maybe very late tonight. In any case this is a bit dry and probably not what you want, but it should still serve as a good teaser for what's going on in this part, hopefully.

The year is 2066 – two years and counting since Ragyo's death and the salvation of the world from the Life-Fibers. A lot has changed in that world. Stepping into the vacuum her Mother's death left, Satsuki Kiryuin lead the movement to rebuild the government and restore some semblance of democracy to Japan. Under her rule, prosperity and hope has returned to the people of this once-poverty ravaged country, and it stands as a beacon to the rest of the world.

A beacon who many who benefit from oppression and inequality want to see snuffed out. Powerful, wealthy people, who under cover of false smiles have rallied together around a new champion: The shattered but still dangerous remains of Ragyo's death cult, REVOCS. With an arsenal of Life-Fiber weaponry pilfered from their old labs, they seek to destroy everything Satsuki has built and return things to the old days, the days of megacorps and brutal hereditary hierarchies. At least that's what they claim, but as for the plans of the cold, alien intellects that lead them...

Well, the Earth was spared once, which should never have happened. This time its death will stick.

Our heroes have changed a great deal since the old days too. They've moved on with their lives, finally acted on those feelings they never had time for before. Mako and Ira have been happily dating nearly the entire time, the same for Houka and Shiro, although they aren't the type to brag. Nonon and Uzu have been together nearly as long, but happily is a bit of a strong word to describe their relationship.

And they haven't just acted on their feelings – this has been a time to pursue ambitions that were mere distractions before. Mataro, who was just an underfoot kid watching from the sidelines last time, has made it his goal to get a Kamui of his own and join the new conflict, no matter what it takes. And of course Rei, who only now has fully realized the error of her ways, has finally been able to get the friends, the belonging, the love she never knew she was missing. For all of them living in the world they saved, protecting their new lives against REVOCS means more than anything.

But the last two years have not been kind to everyone. Satsuki, to whom defeating Ragyo meant more even than her own life, was cast adrift without her mission. Everything she did felt like an afterthought, and though she knew she was stagnating, adapting poorly to a new world not built for her military mindset, that was nothing compared to the guilt she felt. Guilt for her love of Ryuko, her sister, a feeling she neither understood, wanted, nor knew what to do about – and she couldn't help but let that consume her until a confession was inevitable. With so much work left to do in her day to day life she hardly even realized how lost she was becoming, but now – just now that

REVOCS has finally made their move – in the aftermath of The Weekend she spent with Ryuko, she finally feels awake again.

And Ryuko, well, she might have changed the most. She went to college, and although most of it didn't go great, she found a calling in fashion design – the absolute last thing she expected. She's grown more gentle, more secure, and more confident in the confines of a loving family, surrounded by friends. Her life is hardly the normal one she always wanted, but she's got the parts of that life that really matter. And even though she's kept parts of her street punk childhood alive – wild nights on the town, plentiful consumption of alcohol and weed, there's far more that's brand new to her.

Ryuko isn't as afraid as she once was to embrace her wealth and status. She'll probably never get fully used to it, but at least now it doesn't make her want to run away when people bow, even if she wishes they'd just stop. She's so much more comfortable in her body and her sexuality, even going so far as to not just understand Mako's polyamory but to try to embrace it herself. She fell hard and fast for Rei, and even considered – briefly – the most unthinkable thing for the old her: settling down. Satsuki might have thrown all that into chaos, sure, but it was only the seed of an idea so far. Still, the old her couldn't have even done that. The old her was so different. She never used to wear makeup before...

And even more than that, she has finally come around to accepting that the life-fibers are here to stay, and so is she with her immortality and her powers and everything that comes with that. Even going so far as to produce new Kamui for her friends, to prepare them for the fight against REVOCS. Sure, she knew that meant she was going to get dragged back in, but she never expected that they see her as their... mother. Or that it would feel right, somehow. And the words Shiro once asked her: "Wouldn't you like someone to spend eternity with?" keep coming up in her thoughts more than she expected.

Everything has changed. But at the same time, nothing has really changed. The war isn't over, it just changed form. And the world is still not at peace, and the slowly approaching doom – starvation and collapse as the last vestiges of nature wither to dust – that hasn't gone anywhere either. And the fight to survive goes on.

~~~~~

The rest of this chapter is a sort of "reference" section designed so I can infodump and make sure if you want to know specific things you don't have to go back into whatever chapter they were first mentioned in to learn them. Some of this stuff is new info at this point so I'd advise giving it a read now. Some parts won't be done yet and will be filled in as the info is revealed.

~~~~~

### "Power Tiers"

As established in the show, not all beings in the Kill la Kill universe are on equal footing in terms of combat ability, or even footing that's remotely close to each other. Anyone with a Goku uniform was basically invincible to normal people unless they had special anti-life fiber weaponry, Senketsu was so durable that ordinary two-star Goku uniforms couldn't even scratch him or Ryuko, Ragyo was so fast that Ryuko and Satsuki couldn't come close to hitting her, even with the most powerful versions of their Kamuis, and so on.

However, figuring out who exactly is stronger than who in a simple power level sense isn't really possible because combat skill, special abilities, and other factors get in the way. As such, and because I like it better, in the combat mechanics of this fic power levels of characters will be divided up into tiers of approximately equal strength. Characters in the same tier may vary a lot in various attributes like strength, speed, durability, etc., but they will remain on overall equal footing (just as some real people are stronger or faster than others but are all still human). These aren't the end all be all either: you can surmount a tier difference with enough skill or clever use of a special ability, like when Satsuki stalemated Nui without any life-fibers on her at all, just using her swordplay, or when Uzu managed to land a hit on Ragyo while in a three-star Goku uniform thanks to his shingantsu.

Without further ado, here is the tier list, along with examples from the show so you know what the hell I'm talking about:

F: Ordinary humans

D Tier: One Star Goku uniforms:

A One Star Goku uniform is little more than a weapon, with a mind only equal to that of a feeble worm or insect, however it still puts its wearer well beyond the reach of a natural human. The rush of speed and power from one of these uniforms is exhilarating, but unlike higher tiers it is easy enough for just about anyone to handle. Anti- life-fiber weaponry is very effective against this tier.

C Tier: 2+ Star Goku uniforms:

These beings may be made of a fairly high concentration of life-fibers, but they remain nonsentient creatures, clothing that enhances the powers of their wearers and sometimes influences their behaviors. Powers vary greatly in this category, but at bare minimum someone wearing a C Tier being would be able to wrestle an elephant to the ground, and power increases from there up to the point where B Tier begins.

Examples: Two-star, Three-star, and greater Goku uniforms, Rei's and Dr. Isshin's combat clothing, Ryuko as a dormant Hybrid

B Tier: Pure Life-Fiber Beings:

Kamui, Hybrids, and Artificial Humans, these beings have the power to lay waste to armies and cities entirely on their own. Only the strongest anti- life-fiber weaponry is of any use against them at all. This is the highest tier of being that can be created in a lab as of now without some form of unique transformation or apotheosis of a kind that cannot yet be consistently replicated

Examples: Senketsu, Junketsu, Nui, Ryuko as an awakened Hybrid, the Honnouji Defcon Mech

A Tier: Kisaragi:

Pure life-fiber beings who have unlocked their full potential, allowing them to achieve power far beyond what even a Kamui can possess. Reality itself seems to warp in their presence sometimes, as though they exert an invisible pressure upon the very matter around them, trying to reshape it into something else. Kiraragi also typically produce blinding, unnatural light in strange colors and patterns – perhaps a product of their radiant, irrepressible power.

Examples: Ragyo, Senketsu Kisaragi

S Tier: Gods and other Higher Beings:

At this point Tier doesn't really matter anymore, these beings have the power to reshape reality on a planetary or larger scale. Their capabilities are almost beyond the conception of ordinary humans.

Examples: Shinra-Koketsu, the Primordial Life Fiber, Senketsu Kisaragi after absorbing Shinra-Koketsu

~~~~~

### Compatibility

In addition to the power of the life-fibers in a piece of clothing or a hybrid, humans also have a property called life-fiber compatibility. This essentially works as a multiplier to the power of whatever they're wearing, allowing for a deeper connection to the life-fibers and often improving control or accelerating the growth of new forms. It is a genetic property passed on by certain families such as the Kiryuins – some families have been selectively bred to maximize it; others seem to have acquired it via a random mutation (such as the Mankanshokus). Most people have a completely average life-fiber compatibility, only a rare few have a higher value and although it's theoretically possible to be life-fiber incompatible this has never been observed so far. This is essentially the “base power level” of characters.

An example of this in the show is Mako's two-star Goku uniform, which is able to damage Ryuko and Senketsu even though other two-stars can't even scratch her. Mako is also able to momentarily rip control of the Defcon system from Rei in the OVA, further evidence that she has a very high compatibility level.

So far, the following characters have higher than normal life-fiber compatibilities, ranked from highest to lowest (although still above average)

1. Mako Mankanshoku (4.5x the average value most people have)
2. Mataro Mankanshoku (3.33x)
3. The wearer of Kamui Ranketsu (3.2x)
4. The wearers of Kamui's Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu (3x)
5. Rei Hououmaru (2.75x)
6. Ryuko Matoi, Satsuki Kiryuin, and Minazuki Kiryuin (2.5x)
7. Ragyo Kiryuin (2x)
8. Tsumugu Kinagase (1.5x)

### Absorbing Life-Fibers

Some characters and beings are capable of absorbing life-fibers, either freely from the air or from defeated enemies, in order to increase their power. This ability is possessed by Hybrids like Ryuko and Kamui that were made with human DNA like Senketsu, Saiban, and Ryuko's creations. This absorption can noticeably improve their capabilities like leveling up in a video game, but it cannot on its own provide advancement to a higher tier. However, it is an essential step in growing new forms to transform into, as well as a great way to restore energy and defenses.

~~~~~

## Hybrids Vs. Life-Fiber Clothing.

At first glance, a Hybrid and an ordinary human wearing their Kamui would appear to be very similar. They are both ridiculously strong and fast and hard to kill. However, there are meaningful differences between them, both in how they generally work and how they fight.

### Hybrids:

True hybrids are humans which have had life-fibers fully integrated into their biology through a complex surgical procedure. When done to a newborn, this process creates a person with free will – the baby's unformed psyche readily accepts the new addition. However, when attempted on someone older it instead produces a loyal thrall to whatever it is that controls the life-fibers. This does also require that the person willingly surrender themselves to the life-fibers, or else the procedure fails and either leaves the person unharmed or instantly kills them.

Either way, the hybrid's powers are the same. They are possessed not only of super-strength and speed and reflexes but also vastly enhanced senses and no need to eat or drink or even breathe. Their body is also impervious to any disease, poison, or other invasive substance unless they willingly let their guard down (such as when drinking or doing other drugs). In addition, they are also capable of regenerating or reattaching lost or wounded body parts. Their skin is slightly tougher than an ordinary human's and the same is true of their bones, but a hybrid's main defense is their regenerative properties.

All of these various abilities are derived from a very bizarre fact: a hybrid's body can open up miniature wormholes within itself. Harmful substances are teleported off somewhere. The raw materials to heal damaged body parts are brought in and stitched together. If they aren't eating, nutrients are provided; if they aren't breathing, oxygen is dropped off directly in the bloodstream. It is currently unknown where exactly these tiny little teleporters go, but one possible explanation is the home dimension of the life-fibers. (For more details on this check out chapter 4 of part 1)

It is in that same home dimension that the part of a hybrid that contains their consciousness is thought to be found. Even brain destroying damage does not permanently keep a hybrid down, and as such the mind of a hybrid is thought to be housed somewhere else. Unfortunately, the details of this are still mysterious.

As a result of their regeneration, hybrids are best suited to fighting up close and personal. The only thing that can permanently harm them is cross-cutting slashes from hardened life-fiber blades, which leave wounds that can heal, but slowly, and always create a nasty scar. This means that they can rush in, catch on to the enemy's blades with their body, and tear it out, making it impossible for even someone with two swords to kill them unless they're a much, much better fighter.

Hybrids are distinguished from ordinary humans by unnatural color on the underside of their hair and unique eyes with unusual pupil shapes and colors.

It is also possible to create a hybrid from an animal besides a human in much the same way. However, this kills the creature every time unless it is done on a newborn, and even then the result is monstrous to say the least. Animals become what are known as hybrid beasts – raging behemoths many times their previous size with lumpy, misshapen flesh and weaponized claws and fangs and whip-like tails. It is unknown if these creatures follow the will of the life-fibers or are simply rabid rampagers. Either way, they are also capable of regenerating, but unlike human

hybrids this ability will eventually be exhausted, although this can take a very long time on a large hybrid beast.

There is another type of creature similar to a hybrid but not exactly the same – the artificial human. As of now Nui Harime is the only one known to have existed, so many details remain mysterious. Unlike a hybrid no real human was used to create her, she was 100% life-fiber making her both more like a Kamui in the shape of a human and a slave to the life-fibers' will. The powers of an artificial human are mostly the same as a hybrid, but they are differentiated by some abilities unique to them and a manner of moving that is stiff and unnatural looking, sort of like a marionette. Another thing that sets them apart is that they cannot wear Kamui – due to being Kamui themselves their life-fibers will reject it.

### KamuIs and other life-fiber clothing.

On their own Kamui are not especially powerful things. They can shuffle around, move their sleeves, and communicate via gestures, but even a medium sized cat would be more than a match for them. But when you put them into contact with a human via and interchange of their blood, things change. The Kamui boosts its wearers natural strength, speed, and reflexes just the same as the life-fibers inside a hybrid's body do, but in a different way. The human underneath is still human – they cannot regenerate.

Instead, a Kamui has a different defense mechanism: a thin energy field like a magnetic repulsion field that lays millimeters above the wearers skin. Punches and kicks, knives and swords, bullets and flames, even nuclear radiation – anything harmful is rejected by this field. It creates the impression that the skin of the wearer is itself bulletproof, although this is not quite true. The same type of fields surround Goku and Ultima uniforms, although these are less powerful. These fields do not last forever and can be exhausted by sufficient damage, causing Kamui to power down and other life-fiber clothing to be about as protective as regular fabric. They will eventually regenerate and absorbing more life-fibers can speed up this regeneration. Kamui can also regenerate and piece back together their own bodies when damaged like a hybrid, although the same can't be said for their wearer's body.

These fields have one very major weakness though. Hardened life-fiber blades can cut through them as though they weren't there. Although the blade itself is only somewhat stronger and sharper than a regular steel blade, this power makes them essential in battles between Kamui. Because of this, these battles are usually fast, frenetic, and highly lethal, with the possibility of death at the slightest misstep. However, if neither combatant has a blade the battle quickly descends into brutal slugfest as combatants struggle to wear each other's defenses down, which in the case of Kamui could take hours.

Kamui come in two kinds – pure Kamui and bonded Kamui. Pure Kamui do not have any human DNA in their structure, and are as such not just slaves to the life-fiber's mysterious will but embodiments of it, with alien minds incomprehensible to puny human intellect. Bonded Kamui, on the other hand, are much more complex.

A bonded Kamui has been made with a special treatment of human DNA, and is sentient with a mind that works like a humans – thoughts and feelings and memories and everything. They are capable of communicating telepathically – this is easiest with the human they are bonded to, but Senketsu was able to communicate with Tsumugu and Satsuki but it was extremely difficult and



only worked in times of extreme duress. Hybrids and artificial humans are also capable of hearing the telepathic voices of Kamui – Ragyo and Nui were able to hear Senketsu in the final battle. However, this is nothing compared to what they share with their bonded human.

A kamui and their wearer can do more than just converse. They can sense each other's feelings, see and hear and feel what each other are, and read each others memories. Over time, this creates a closeness that no words can express, and a Kamui and their wearer will come to feel that they complement each other more like two halves than two separate people. This should not be equated with romantic love – Kamui don't actually seem to fully comprehend human sexuality except through their wearers experiences – it really is more that a Kamui becomes a piece of its wearers very self, and vice versa.

~~~~~

A list of notable fighters:

### **Ryuko Matoi**

Type: Free-willed Hybrid

Tier: High B Tier

Powered down appearance: Ryuko looks much the same as always, but the red on the underside of her hair is brighter than before and sparkles in the right light.

Transformed appearance: When channeling her full power Ryuko's hair glows a fiery red-orange and her body emanates a heat that warps the air around her.

Alternate Forms: None so far

Special Abilities: Seamstress: Ryuko has a instinctual ability to manipulate life-fibers ad use them to create clothing and other objects. She can do this using her hands or telekinetically, but prefers telekinesis.

### **Satsuki Kiryuin**

Type: Human

Tier: F Tier, but skillful enough to face opponents of higher tier

Powered down appearance: Satsuki has kept her hair short, and now prefers to tie it off in a bun or topknot while fighting

Transformed appearance: N/A

Alternate Forms: N/A

Special abilities: Chi focus: Satsuki can remain utterly still even in combat, removing telegraphs from her attacks to confuse her opponent. She also uses short "shouts" during combat the intimidate her opponent and throw them off guard.

## **Kamui Saiban and Nonon Jakuzure**

Type: Bonded Kamui and Human

Tier: Low-middle B Tier

Powered down appearance: Saiban is a short, elegant emerald green cocktail dress with gold and silver accents and a snakeskin pattern. His skirts are parted in the middle so Nonon can freely move her legs

Transformed appearance: Saiban's most notable trait is a long, forked coattail that Nonon can use as a prehensile tail. His shoulderpads are thin and razor sharp, shaped like wasp wings with pointed ends. In order to boost Nonon forward he is capable of projecting blasts of golden get flames, and a web of golden lights trails through him.

Personality: Saiban is irrepressibly curious about the world around him, to the point of distracting him and Nonon. He struggles to fully understand the complexities of human life, but that's just one more thing to be curious about.

Alternate forms: None so far

Special abilities: Aura Hound: Saiban can sense the auras of both other life-form beings and living creatures from much further away than most Kamui.

## **Kamui Nekketsu and Aikuro Mikisuki**

Type: Bonded Kamui and Human

Tier: Low B Tier

Powered down appearance: A white suit with a violet vest and tie and popped collars.

Transformed appearance: (I'm just gonna quote exactly what I wrote when I first described them) Nekketsu's transformed shape kept some semblance to a suit. The popped collars had fanned out into a vast fan like a manta-ray's fins, the ends of which swooped down to connect to his shoulders. Despite being huge and ostentatious, they were flexible too, and it was there that Nekketsu's eyes were, round and oddly surprised looking and far redder than Saiban's. The tie had become a web of wire-thin lines that traced down his torso, glowing and pulsing as they outlined each muscle. Below that they connected to a speedo like hip component. Nekketsu's boots were thin and pointed, with glowing filamentous wires extending from them too, framing the contours of his legs. The arms were a bit more covered, and the wide collar connected to armored shoulderpieces with huge sets of interlocking vents that huffed steam out over his arms, and wide silky sleeves tipped in black gloves with talons on each finger. The horns that cropped from his blue hair as it whipped around were short and curved, with a sort of webbing behind them that made them look thicker from the sides.

Personality: Dainty and cautious, often a bit shocked by how much she instinctively enjoys combat

Alternate forms: None so far

Special Abilities: Shock Absorption. Blows that hit Nekketsu's field are deflected even more efficiently than most, with the concussive impact being negated. Aikuro cannot be knocked over

even by very powerful attacks, hell come back up like a punching bag, and he cannot be knocked off-course by being shot while jumping in midair.

### **Kamui Seijitsu and Uzu Sanageyama**

Type: Bond Kamui and Human

Tier: Low B Tier

Powered down appearance: A Gi with a turquoise color and deep navy hakama

Transformed appearance: The only thing covering most of Uzu's body was a thin leathery skirt like a loincloth, longer in the front than on the sides giving it a shape like bat's wings, and a mess of geometrically curling green ribbons that trailed from toes clad in steel toed sandals up to his shoulders. But those shoulders made up for the rest easily. Huge curved pauldrons like devil's horns, from which Seijitsu's orange-green eyes beamed out, appearing furrowed with determination. All the gold ended up there too, in decorous trimmings that made the whole thing glint. They were connected by a high collar and a breastplate that extended down to around heart level and no lower. They also matched to the tiny little curved horns that rose from his erratic mess of hair, which danced flamelike above his face. The only thing that carried over was the hakama, which had migrated over his shoulders into a voluminous cape with the same color and pattern it had before. It also wrapped around to his left arm like a renaissance fencer's cape and since it was made of life-fibers it would be plenty strong to fulfill the same purpose - a shield.

Personality: Exuberant and naively enthusiastic about just about everything. Not that she's cocky or anything, she's just out for a good time and to make the most of her new life.

Alternate forms: None so far

Special abilities: Moldable Cape: Seijitsu's cape can change shape into practically anything. Fencer's shield, whip, raincoat, giant leathery wings, backpack, bandage, whatever could be helpful while remaining attached to Uzu's shoulders

### **Kamui Tekketsu and Ira Gamagoori**

Type: Bond Kamui and Human

Tier: Low B Tier

Powered down appearance: A gilded tunic with his family crest over bronze colored chainmail, like a medieval knight.

Transformed appearance: Ira's shoulders and arms were entirely covered in interlocking plates of brassy metal that resembled impossibly roided muscles. If it weren't for Tekketsu's eyes peering out it would be easy to think there was muscle under there as well. The entire thing whirled, and dozens of vents opened seemingly from nowhere to huff massive clouds of steam. The bottom half of Ira's torso was covered in the same sort of metal above skintight shorts, and his feet and lower legs were equally well armored, making it look like he was barefoot and had stepped in a sort of metallic mud.

Personality: Suave and clever, Tekketsu is very good at reading people and enjoys forcing Ira into social situations. She isn't intimidated by danger either but lets him take the lead in battle.

Alternate forms: None so far

Special abilities: Scale Shift: Defying the laws of biology and physics, Tekketsu can change the size of Ira's body itself. Normal she increases his size to make him about ten feet tall, but maybe there are other sizes she can do as well...

### **Kamui Misaki and Houka Inamuta**

Type: Bond Kamui and Human

Tier: Low B Tier

Powered down appearance: A 19<sup>th</sup> century European military uniform in blue with gold tassels and medals.

Transformed appearance: Misaki's transformed mode turned things around – the other men had Kamui that mostly covered their limbs and left their torso free, but Houka's chest down to his thighs was covered in a skintight blue material that seemed to glow all on its own. Only two oval slits on the side showed and skin at all. But on the other hand, his arms and legs were mostly free but for large, sharp looking gauntlets and spiked combat boots and the wires to connect them all to the main body. The shoulders were rounded like pearls and quite smooth and sleek, with large vents positioned between them on Houka's back.

Personality: Loudmouthed and abrasive, she is very protective of Houka and Shiro but distrustful of most everyone else, even their friends just a little bit. With Houka though she is very casual and lighthearted, and she is very close with Shiro's Kamui Izanami as well.

Alternate forms: None so far

Special Abilities: Supersense: Houka's senses are improved by Misaki to the point that they are equal to Ryuko's

### **Kamui Izanami and Shiro Iori**

Type: Bond Kamui and Human

Tier: Low B Tier

Powered down appearance: a tall, velvety lab coat in a deep maroon with a modern military uniform beneath it

Transformed appearance: Like Uzu's Seijitsu, Izanami in her transformed shape had flowing capes and skirts, but they were parted into eight prehensile arms made of thin fabric, and on each, an eye. He still had shoulder spikes, a set of thin prongs far too thin to hold an eye, to match the thin, straight horns that cropped from his blond hair. The rest of his body was also enveloped in a glowing skintight material with holes and swirling patterns revealing skin in seemingly random shapes.

Personality: Cheerful and constantly joking, she seems to enjoy mocking Shiro's generally dry, serious mindset.

Alternate forms: Kamui supercomputer: Izanami's physical form is split between her clothing form and a vast living computer in the basement of Shiro's lab. She is constantly connected to the

computer and is slowly creeping across the internet. This allows her to quickly look up information and perform calculations even while in combat.

Special Abilities: Multiarm: the prehensile arms that grow from Izanami's cape can each operate on their own, and she can see from each of them. They can also regrow very quickly if they are cut off.

### **Kamui Furashada and Rei Hououmaru**

Type: Bonded Kamui and Human

Tier: Middle-high B Tier

Powered down appearance: Furashada has a tight fitting bodice made of cream yellow metal, a silver-green jacket with lavender buttons over it, a long skirt with lavender embroidery and tights ending in high heeled sandals, and something between a cape and a shawl over one shoulder.

Transformed appearance: Diaphanous, glowing lace trailed off Rei's limbs and off the huge, smoothly curving lavender-ivory shoulderspikes, massive tusks that erupted as if from her own soft skin. The fabric swept around her breasts and down the center of her stomach to a skirt of leathery webbing, longer in the back than the front making a sort of tail, was also glowing with patterns that seemed to project a couple centimeters off her skin and shift slowly

Personality: Calm and soft-spoken, Furashada has a peaceful outlook at odds with his destructive nature. Still, when people he cares about are in danger, he can fly into a rage just like Rei can.

Alternate forms: None so far

Special abilities: Deeper link: Rei's high compatibility allows her to communicate with Furashada directly with her thoughts, far faster and in more detail than the others.

### **Kamui Reiketsu and Tsumugu Kinagase**

Type: Bonded Kamui and Human

Tier: Low-Middle B Tier

Powered down appearance: High collars and broad, smooth shoulders like a modern army uniform, thin horizontal plates down the torso like samurai armor, bulky sleeves and cuffs with leather gloves, all done in a sleek steel-grey with gold and crimson highlights.

Transformed appearance: Tsumugu's arms and shoulders gain a silver armor plating with interlocking scales and red highlights. In front of this, Reiketsu's eyes are placed on large prongs similar to those on Senketsu, but with a wider shape like a huge bowtie. His torso and back have sets of vents trailing down them, alternating with patches of bare skin. Around his waist there is a thick red and gold loincloth with a set of pouches that latch shut - Reiketsu can open and close them on her own.

Personality: Serious and passionate like Tsumugu, but lacking his cynicism. She is earnest and trusting, and tends to do the feeling for both of them. Despite enjoying exploring the world and meeting new people, she shares with Tsumugu a preference for relaxing alone or with a few friends and withdrawing from the world.

Alterante forms: None so far

Special abilities: space warping pockets: Pouches on Reiketsu can contain an unreasonable amount of supplies, weapons, and other gadgets up to twice Tsumugu's body weight without weighing him down at all. Oddly, things tend to come out either scalding hot or freezing cold, so it's probably not the best idea to put anything living in there.

### **Kamui Rosuketsu**

Type: Pure Kamui

Tier: High B Tier

Powered down appearance: Rosuketsu resembled a kimono with flowing silky sleeves of golden-white, a huge red bow on a sash about the waist, and rose patterns all across the silvery bodice

Transformed appearance:

Alternate forms: Unknown

Special abilities: Unknown

### **Kamui Yuriketsu**

Type: Pure Kamui

Tier: High B Tier

Powered down appearance: A shiny gold and red dress in the traditional European style with voluminous skirts that puff out like wings and tight corset with delicate embroidery

Transformed appearance: Unknown

Alternate forms: Unknown

Special abilities: Unknown

### **Kamui Sumiretsu**

Type: Pure Kamui

Tier: High B Tier

Powered down appearance: A European dress in a Greco-Roman style, flowing silky purple robes with silver belts and tassels

Transformed appearance: Unknown

Alternate forms: Unknown

Special abilities: Unknown

### **Kamui Ranketsu**

Type: Pure Kamui

Tier: High B Tier

Powered down appearance: A sari with a light turquoise shawl over a dress of deepest navy blue, speckled with silver starbursts

Transformed appearance: Unknown

Alternate forms: Unknown

Special abilities: Unknown

# Monday From Hell: Don't I know you from somewhere, Kamui?

## Chapter Summary

Typos aside, I legitimately think this might be my favorite thing I've written so far. By no means perfect, but combat is very hard to write and I think I did an okay job. Let me know what you think/how I can improve.

## Chapter Notes

Music again! There was only one track that was really right for this scene:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajyTpww5uj8>

October 2066

~~~~~

In the limo on the way back to Tokyo, Ryuko could hear every detail of both sides of Satsuki's phone-call with her unnaturally enhanced hearing. On the other end of the line, Nonon was breathlessly laying out the entire unfortunate turn of events, and although Ryuko wanted to rage and scream about how of course it had to be *now* of all fucking times that they showed back up, she could see that Satsuki's brows were twitching, eyes flickering, and that made it obvious she was in deep thought. So she kept quiet until Satsuki finished listening, fired off a string of straightforward orders, and hung up with a "Good luck, I believe in you".

She turned to Ryuko with a very severe look on her face. "You heard all that, yes?"

"Uh-huh," Ryuko nodded, but then she couldn't keep her tongue in check any longer, "Those bastards! Why can't they see they've already lost? I'm gonna go down there and rip that devil Kamui right off whoever that stupid fuck is that's wearing it!" She started to roll down the window with the intention of leaping out and running off to the battle through traffic, not thinking about how she didn't actually know where the base was. Out the window she could see traffic stretching out on the highway well into the distance – apparently the attack was causing major gridlock. She was about to get up, but the amused half smile on Satsuki's face stopped her. "What?"

"Well, that's just exactly what I was going to suggest you do, and – oh hold on," Satsuki interrupted herself as her phone pinged, "It's Shiro's Kamui. Since when can a Kamui send emails?" Satsuki remembered Shiro trying to explain how his Kamui was connected to the internet, but it was so complicated it required an understanding of quantum entanglement which Satsuki hadn't had a chance to read up on.



*\*Urgent tactical update: RM – RK possible link\** The subject line read, and Satsuki pursed her lips in puzzlement. “One moment,” She said to Ryuko and read on.

*\*Hello Satsuki,*

*By now you have no doubt been informed of the ongoing attack on Tokyo infrastructure by REVOCS and the presence of a spearhead force lead by an enemy Kamui at the supermax prison. Shiro has asked me to send you this urgent addendum to the strategic briefing provided by Commander Jakuzure:*

*RM must not engage any enemy of similar strength to herself.*

*Recent discoveries in the ongoing investigation of RK’s status have confirmed that allowing the enemy to capture RM is a lose condition. Any situation in which RM is at risk of capture must be avoided at all cost. I have attached a full report on the RK investigation for your perusal to explain why this is the case. However, further detail is unnecessary within this message itself.*

*With all due to respect to your position as interim supreme commander of our armed forces, I humbly ask that you heed this update and do not needlessly court disaster.*

*Thank you,*

*Izanami\**

Satsuki’s first reaction was to stare at the email blankly. Even Shiro wouldn’t be so blunt unless it was really important, and this was filtered through his Kamui, who as far as Satsuki knew was a bit friendlier than he. So why? She clicked on the report and kept reading, flicking through the lines so quickly that Ryuko couldn’t help but be impressed.

*Consciousness surviving the destruction of the body... accidental absorption... Oh no.* Satsuki’s mind instantly began racing with the implications but that wasn’t especially helpful. The moment she realized that, Satsuki turned her thoughts to what to do about it.

“What’s wrong?” Ryuko asked urgently – Satsuki’s face had gone even paler than usual.

“Change of plan,” Satsuki decided, “Go to the other areas first, wrap up the fighting there. Nonon will reroute the others to battle the Kamui. Go to the police station first”

“Wha – I – hold on why?” Ryuko shouted over the rush of wind from the open window. What fucking excuse could Satsuki have for not letting her kill the Kamui and end this nightmare before it began?

“You’re the fastest, you can clear multiple attacks faster than the others could clear one.”

“Well yeah, but I’m the strongest too! I’ll just go kill it and that’ll be that, easy! The others aren’t strong enough yet, they haven’t absorbed enough life fibers”

“No. It’s not tactically sound.”

“Give me one good reason.”

“Ryuko do I really have to explain the entire theory of economy of force to you? We’re kind of in a rush here!” Satsuki snapped, and the tone of her voice brokered no argument. Ryuko

clambered nimbly out the window and, after a moment hanging on the side of the car sped off, weaving between traffic so quickly that Satsuki could only tell where she was by the wind whipping up trash and gravel in her wake.

And then she was gone, and Satsuki was left waiting impotently in the gridlock for a helicopter to come pick her up, mulling over Shiro's report with a bleak feeling. The more she thought about it, the surer she was that Ryuko would be better off never knowing. But no, she had to know.

*Well, here I am. The great Satsuki Kiryuin relegated to uselessness by mere traffic. I guess this is the egalitarian future I dreamed of.*

~~~~~

**“NOT ONE STEP FURTHER, REVOCS SCUM!”** Ira bellowed, and the Kamui wearing Minazuki Kiryuin's body, oddly enough, obeyed. It stared at him with the easy contempt of a human regarding a cockroach.

“So, I guess now we know what became of you after you vanished, Minazuki Kiryuin” Ira addressed Minazuki. “Can't say I'm surprised, Kiryuin or not, you never had vision. Disappointed, well, that's another matter. But I'll let Satsuki take care of that once I rip that thing off you. Or you could just surrender and save me the trouble. As you can see, you are surrounded. There is no hope of escape, even with your Kamui.”

Surprisingly it was Takamori who spoke, laughing with a harsh, savage bark. Scraggly and haggard as he had become in prison he was still a handsome man, and his followers looked at him in adoration as he jumped up on a chunk of rubble with eyes glinting madly, “Minazuki? *Really?* She is far beyond your reach. She is part of something greater now!”

**“SILENCE!”** Ira roared. He'd tried being nice, no more of that, **“YOU ARE A TRAITOR TO OUR ENTIRE SPECIES! YOU WILL SURRENDER OR I WILL KILL YOU ALL MYSELF.”**

“Ohoho! You forget yourself, Gamagoori!” Takamori sneered sardonically, and as Ira watched the Kamui wearing Minazuki's body shifted its feet slightly and he realized it wouldn't wait for him to finish ranting to attack. This one wasn't like Junketsu, with its gleeful rage – it was smart. “You believe you have a partnership with your Kamui, that you are equals? Oh, does she talk to you? Call you her *friend*? Pftahaha!” He broke down in laughter, the thrill of his imminent triumph overwhelming any sense of composure and letting the madness leak out. “No true child of the life-fibers is so small that it seeks the companionship of humanity! Look at Minazuki, just a mere cog in the vastness of Kamui Rosuketsu, as it should be! What you have made is an abomination not worthy of being called a Kamui!”

It was at that moment that Rosuketsu made its move, but Ira was ready the moment its feet left the ground and glinting black swords erupted from nowhere in its hands. Spinning all the way around he hurled the steel door back at the charging Kamui, but it was cut cleanly in half in midair as Rosuketsu sailed towards him.

Still, that gave him enough time to block its righthand sword with his and grab the left with the bladed talons on his backhand. The moment they clashed, a massive blast of force whipped the air around them, sending rubble flying and clearing all the smoke so that both sides could see each other clearly for the first time. It felt like they were repelling magnets forced together, and all the

built tension between them released in an explosion of sheer willpower, just as had happened the first time Ryuko and Satsuki met in battle.

Steam huffed from Tekketsu as she and Ira realized just how strong this thing was. He towered over the woman's body it possessed, but that hardly seemed to matter. He had to guess that of all the Kamui Corps, he might be the only one with the raw strength to hold her down

*[This is going to be tough!]* Tekketsu chimed, but that wasn't going to stop either of them. Ira barged forward with his huge shoulder, swinging his sword in a great sweeping arc to force Rosuketsu to spring backwards, and as he pressed his advantage the DTRs and soldiers behind him opened fire. The REVOCs cultists in their shiny white Ultima uniforms were quick to respond in kind, and the gates to the prison collapsed into chaos.

There were probably only about 50 or so REVOCs cultists involved in the assault, maybe a couple hundred soldiers divided between the DTRs and those on foot, but still that barren tract of asphalt quickly became a bloodbath the likes of which hadn't been seen since the Tri-City Raid Trip.

The Ultima uniforms may have been strange looking with their leotards, lilac veins, and big bulky gauntlets, but they were even faster and more brutal than the Goku uniforms before. The cultists wearing them – handsome men and women with hollow eyes and waxed, hairless bodies – loped forward and sprayed bullets with absolute confidence in their defenses. Their faces were hardened, but there was a sort of gleeful wantonness as they smashed DTRs with swinging, clumsy punches.

But the DTRs danced backwards just as quickly, and the air was immediately filled with perfectly accurate streams of jamming needles. Just as easily as the Ultima cultists could seize them and rip the thin metal and fragile human apart, so too could their lanky servo-legs kick them down and hose them with enough needles to turn their uniforms into loose life-fibers that were inevitably siphoned over to Ira and Tekketsu. This was what they were built for, after all, although half of the pilots weren't former Nudist Beach now, they were former Honoujji students.

All tactics were out the window – pure reflex and valor were what mattered now. It was like a trapeze show, just with more blood. The soldiers standing behind the barricade and the prisoners across from them had no choice but to crouch in cover, try and shoot anyone who slowed down, and hope nobody decided to gun them down.

And in the center of it all stood Ira, like a great immobile axel of metal and muscle around which the entire battle spun. He may have had unnatural speed thanks to Tekketsu, but compared to Rosuketsu he was still a lumbering brute. It might have finished him off in moments but for one advantage he had that couldn't be surmounted: reach. With absurdly long arms paired with a blade almost nine feet long he could keep it not just at bay but more than twelve feet away. And whenever it did manage to dart in his offhand was there, slicing with hardened life-fiber talons. Still, he was never considered the best swordsman of the elites, and against an opponent like Rosuketsu he had no time to think.

It was just like Junketsu, maybe not as infuriatingly arrogant, but in the way it fought there was no difference. Speed difference aside Ira still nearly had his guard broken a few times just because of how unusual the style was. Raw, vicious strikes that from a human opponent would have been imprecise, a sign of an opponent on the ropes, coupled with a writhing of the body that jerked and shuddered like a rabid dog – it all looked so vicious but every blow was calculated. Soon Ira found himself reflexively pulling back every time there seemed to be a gap in its defense.

They were all ruses, what appeared to be laziness was actually a perfect trap, like the creature was manipulating the parts of human body language we cannot voluntarily control

Ira thought only Satsuki and Uzu had ever mastered a perfect technique for swordsmanship, but this was something different. A technique derived from millennia of molding the human form, calculating ideal movements. An alien way of fighting. Ira and Tekketsu were both so preoccupied just keeping it at bay that they never even realized the bodies were piling up on both sides around them, or that as the minutes dragged by that they might not be killed by Rosuketsu, but they sure hadn't a clue how to defeat it either. Until –

**“Incoming!”** A shrill voice shouted behind him, and Ira ducked at just the right moment. From behind his gigantic shoulders Nonon, framed against the early morning sunlight, shot forward with *Kiba* extended as though it was pulling her along. With a mighty **“KRA-KOOM!”** another blast of force rocketed through the air and sent empty bullet casings scattering as she joined the fray – late, sure, but not too late.

“Nonon!” Ira shouted, as Rosuketsu deftly blocked her naginata and then, as a third and final blast of force ricocheted across the battlefield, it managed to twist its other arm almost entire around its back, barely parrying a stab from Houka as he slid in. “About time!” Ira finished snidely as they sprung back to regard their enemy.

“Save your quips you colossal moron!” Nonon spat, “They were never your strong suit anyway.”

“What an unusual way of moving this creature has!” Houka observed, dragging the tips of his rapiers along the ground as he charged back into the fray, spraying sparks into Minazuki's eyes. Nonon and Ira weren't far behind him, and now that they outnumbered their enemy, they could force it back. It couldn't block three attacks at once, or so they thought, but no sooner had the flurry of blades begun again than did it twist its legs up and plant such a mighty kick on Ira's chest that it sent him skidding back across the battlefield. “It's like it has every muscle under perfect control!”

“Wait this isn't – holy shit it is Satsuki's cousin!” Nonon blurted when she got a breath as Ira leapt back in. All the Kamui immediately asked if they were supposed to know who that was, but when they didn't get a response they focused on the battle. “Hahaha Oh man I hope we get out of this alive 'cuz I need time to unpack this one!”

**“I thought you said we weren't doing quips!”** Ira bellowed

“Yeah, yeah. Alright team lets mulch this bitch!”

From that point on Rosuketsu barely touched the ground, and neither did Nonon or Houka. With their aid Ira could finally bring his clunky but effective style to bear. They would leap to meet it in midair, blades would clash at speeds beyond normal human perception, and then when Rosuketsu landed Ira would throw in a huge swipe – which would be dodged – but the followup kick wouldn't be. And each time they pushed Rosuketsu closer to the doors, and the DTRs (who had been reinforced and wiped out the Ultima cultists by now) would stun the outlying prisoners. Only a few were left now – Takamori, the assassins who had failed to kill Ryuko, and Itsuki. They were spared only because no-one was brave – or stupid – enough to go within fifty yards of the Kamui fight.

“Now, how are we supposed to get an opening in?” Houka grunted in frustration. This had gone on for minutes and, whereas Nonon was having an absolute blast, combat was more occupation than hobby for him and he was hoping for a quick takedown. But this thing just seemed to get even more unpredictable the more they hacked at it. And it never made a sound, never gave any indication it might be tiring out.

*[Never mind that!]* Kamui Misaki suddenly chimed in his ear. *[Missiles incoming!]*

“Missiles?” Houka glanced up, luckily ducking under a decapitating strike as he saw with his supersenses a pod of concussion missile zooming their way, as well as the helicopter that fired them. “Good call! Evasive action!”

When the missiles slammed into the four combatants, they did nothing at all to wound them, but they did knock them all away from Rosuketsu. Nonon barely had time to shout “Okay, what the hell!” before the whirr of helicopter rotors drowned everything out.

Ira fell flat on his back, and Rosuketsu leapt at him, swords pointing down into his heart.

“Ira no!” Nonon screamed to herself as she rushed towards them, but Ira wasn’t done yet. Gritting his teeth, he whipped an arm up to grab Minazuki’s body, seizing her by the waist with one huge hand. Blood seeped through Rosuketsu’s fabric as his talons dug in. That serene face flinched for the first time, and Ira grinned in satisfaction. He got the smug bastard to hurt.

Seeing the opportunity, Nonon sprung for the kill. Rosuketsu wasn’t done either though, and with an unnatural twist of Minazuki’s body it scraped a sword along his belly where Tekketsu’s metal plating didn’t reach. Now blood erupted from him too, as he gasped in shock. He tried to dig his fingers in tighter, thinking only: *We’ve got eight in total, plus Ryuko. They’ve only got four. We come out ahead in this trade.*

*[IRA WHAT’S HAPPENING!]* Tekketsu shouted – not remotely composed now. This was the first time so much pain had bled through from him, and she just... this sensation was wrong. A million thoughts flashed through her, so loud that he could hear them, but never once could she seem to wrap her head around the idea that they really might die here.

And just as quickly as Ira realized he was okay taking Rosuketsu down with him, he realized that if there was one thing he could never accept it was doing the same to Tekketsu. She’d only just begun to live, how selfish to take that from her!

With a roar of rage and exertion Ira pitched Rosuketsu at Nonon, who thought quick and got ready to slice. But somehow, even with blood still trailing from its wounds, the Kamui managed to swivel in midair and meet her blade.

Meanwhile the helicopter had nearly reached the ground. Houka saw the door slide open and the bloated face of Kuriodo, that damned steward who’d been such a thorn in Satsuki’s side, sitting there with a smug grin. Ira was on the ground bleeding, Nonon was off fighting the Kamui again, and it looked like somehow – oh Satsuki was going to be *furios* – Takamori might actually manage to get away. Somehow the whole damn thing was falling apart again.

But the team came first. Houka rushed over to Ira, shouting, “Are you okay?” over the din of the rotors. Ira sat up, patted his belly, examined the wound, and nodded with a rush of relief.

“Just a flesh wound. I got lucky.”

“Well, you do have a lot of flesh there big guy,” Houka said as he sped off, but he still hadn’t decided if helping Nonon or trashing the helicopter was more important. Fortunately, something happened that decided things for him.

Specifically, a bullet hole appeared in between Kuroido’s eyes. He was dead before he even had time to register surprise.

Houka stopped up short, whipping his head around to try and find who the hell shot that. It couldn’t have been the DTRs, they all had needles. It couldn’t be the footsoldiers, they were on the wrong side of the helicopter. That meant...

“Itsuki!” Ira blurted in overjoyed shock. And Houka spotted the former REVOCs assassin, standing up on a piece of rubble next to Takamori, blasting the other two assassins before they had a chance to figure out what was even happening.

Takamori’s eyes bulged out of his skull, his lips pulled into a hissing rictus – he could barely believe what was happening. “Itsuki, what the hell are you *doing*?” He snarled.

Itsuki responded, as smug as could be (he’d been rehearsing this for hours now). “Sorry sir. Consider it a plea bargain.” And he fired, but Takamori whipped around to try and shoot him, and so the bullet, rather than sailing through his brain instead pulverized his lower jaw. He collapsed in a heap, tumbling from the rubble with a strangled groan.

“TAKAMORI! NO!” For the first time, Rosuketsu spoke. But that voice, ripped and desperate with panic, that wasn’t the same smooth, oily voice the Kamui produced from Minazuki. For just a moment, something else had poked through.

“Stand and fight, you pussy!” Nonon screeched as Rosuketsu skidded over to Takamori. It grasped at him with those clawed fingers, cradling him. He gurgled, not dead, but wishing he was. The bottom of his once beautiful face – perfect Kiryuin loveliness – was a ruin of blood and spongy meat and splinters of bone. Minazuki’s head turned to Itsuki, eyes glowing with rage, and he stared back at them. He was proud to have gotten in one last “fuck you” to the cult that had stolen so much of his life, and to have paid Ira back for all the nuisance he caused him.

This time Houka was on things though. He was between them before Rosuketsu could eviscerate Itsuki, blocking her and throwing in a riposte with his offhand rapier, and now it was Rosuketsu’s turn to look wildly around, trying to find a way to get Takamori the hell out of there.

The helicopter stopped being an option pretty quickly. The pilot was so confused and shocked by this turn of events that he didn’t notice what the rest of Ira’s soldiers were up to. One of them put a rocket into the cockpit, and that was that for the helicopter. That left only the simplest, most direct route.

Rosuketsu grabbed Takamori, leapt into the air and – to everyone’s surprise – didn’t come down.

“Oh are you *kidding* me? Even that thing can fly?” Nonon shouted, growling with frustration. “Someone bring her down!” She hurled a piece of rubble but it fell short, leaving Rosuketsu to drift off until it was just a silhouette against the smoke, hovering above the hill the prison was built into. Nonon felt like cussing it out just for the hell of it.

“Well, they got Takamori, but not in good shape, Rosuketsu’s wounded, they lost all their troopers, and I’m going to be just fine as soon as I get some gauze,” Ira recapped, feeling generally positive

about the whole thing after seeing Itsuki betray his former commander. “This feels like at least a draw, right?”

“I... I think you’re calling it a bit too soon,” Houka stammered, staring up at Rosuketsu’s fading silhouette. With his supersenses he saw something, something that would become apparent to the others as the smoke began to clear.

Rosuketsu wasn’t the only silhouette drifting menacingly above them.

# Monday From Hell: Strength and numbers

## Chapter Summary

A bit late as usual, but here's another chapter for you guys

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~~~~~

“Please -hrrk!- please tell me the others are coming, or Ryuko or someone,” Ira grunted as he stood up, pressing a giant hand to the shallow cut along his stomach to staunch the bleeding as much as he could.

“What! We don’t need her help, moron!” Nonon hissed

“Well, we need *something*! We can’t fight them alone, we need to retreat!”

“Can’t retreat! We run; we’ll lead them right into the city!” The prison was built in an abandoned industrial complex, blending in with all the other doors nobody cared about anymore. But beyond that rows of tenements sprung up – tenements full of people. Houka with his enhanced senses could see them standing on the roofs, trying to see what was happening so close to their homes. “We gotta hold them until the others get here!” She could feel through Saiban that the first few were closing in, but would it be enough?

Nonon was aware her plan wasn’t especially helpful, but it was hard to think. Terror coursed through her veins, but it pounded even stronger in Saiban. The Kamui were practically screaming to each other about how horrid those things were (they could communicate with each other, but their wearers only got their side of the conversation and it could be quite distracting). With that, Ira’s injury, all the soldiers and bystanders, and the knowledge that the three of them had only barely won the upper hand against *one* pure Kamui, she was paralyzed by indecision.

Ira shrugged his huge shoulders and readied his blade. The pain on his belly was needling, gripping like a huge papercut, but he knew he wouldn’t die and staying and fighting was – in his calculations – no more risky than it had been minutes ago. He decided Nonon was right, they’d all learned so much from Satsuki, and she’d been at her side longest. He nodded and affirmed, “Yes commander!”

“Hey guys, now that we got that sorted,” Houka pointed out, “Maybe we should talk about why they aren’t doing anything.”

Up above, another disagreement was taking place. There was a contradiction in understandings, a contradiction which had to be rectified. Rosuketsu’s brief infection – the not at all Kamui-like panic when Takamori had been shot – had already been smoothed over and Minazuki was slumbering peacefully once again. But still, the contradiction remained.



There were no words exchanged in this disagreement, but if the process could be summated as a conversation it might have proceeded in this manner.

*[Now is the opportune moment to press the attack. The polluted Kamui are weak and divided, but the rest of their brood are closing in. We must purify them while we have the advantage in power]* Imagine perhaps that this is the voice of Kamui Ranketsu, who hovered with a snarl on its human face between two huge, spear shaped pauldrons, ready to attack

*[No. The human demagogue is badly damaged. It must be evacuated immediately.]* This might then be Rosuketsu, who still cradled Takamori. He was fading quickly, totally unconscious now.

*[The value of the human demagogue is low compared to that of purifying three or our enemy's children.]*

*[She might be here soon.]* This understanding added in another tangential opportunity. A bothersome addition to an already difficult contradiction, imagine it then being suggested by Kamui Yuriketsu. For some reason its human host was still wearing a plastered on, too-wide smile, as though it was stuck like that. *[Capturing the enemy has the highest value of all.]*

*[It will not be possible. We cannot fight the entire brood and the enemy at once].*

*[Which is why we must retreat.]*

*[Which is why we must attack now.]*

It was at this moment that Tsumugu barreled through the DTRs retreating out the main gate. Kamui Reketsu was still trailing goutts of crimson flames from its back vents, and silvery domed pauldrons huffed steam. Her eyes, mounted on armored plates that trailed out from Tsumugu's neck like a giant gold and red bowtie, whipped around just as his did, until he spotted Nonon, Ira and Houka who were issuing retreat orders to soldiers left standing while keeping a wary eye on the floating Kamui.

"Heads up!" He shouted, and a pod of concussion missiles shot off over their heads from an auto-launcher he'd dropped moments ago. The others watch them slam into Ranketsu's swirling robes, deep blue like the sunless depths of the ocean. It did no harm, but it did knock the Kamui off course. And that was all Tsumugu needed. He'd tried the concussion missiles on Ryuko once, but he'd learned since then.

The moment the Kamui shuddered, was distracted evading the first volley, an arrow travelling at lightning speeds sunk deep into its arm and pulled it down like an anchor into the nearby scrapyard with a crash and a plume of dust and debris. And then there was Aikuro, skidding in not moments after Tsumugu. His bow still ready in his hands, and he chuckled to himself about the raw power he was able to pull from it. "Still got it," He muttered to himself, and Nekketsu gasped in awe that *she* had made that happen.

This made everything a whole lot simpler. Nonon's paralysis vanished in a rush of determination.

"Nice shot Aikuro!" She shouted, twirling *Kiba* in the direction of Ranketsu, "Let's gang up and finish that thing before they even know what's happening!"

“Here, take these first!” Tsumugu reached into one of the pouches on his loincloth – a red and silver piece of synthetic fabric with jagged patterns though it. He produced three glowing red capsules and quickly tossed them to each of the others, as well as a pack of blood-clotting gel for Ira.

“What are they?”

“Life-fiber capsules. Absorb them – it’ll restore your energy.”

Nonon was the first to nod and crack it open, starting to run behind Tsumgu and Aikuro as she did so. And it worked just as Tsumugu had advertised – she felt as refreshed and energized as if she’d just transformed, and Saiban felt even better, humming along with his energy field at full power once again. He could feel the enemy Kamui up ahead, and a deep clawing feeling in him told him it had to die.

*[Five against one? We’ll tear it to shreds!]* He crowed, and the other Kamui crowed with him as they leapt over the rubble into the crater in which Kamui Ranketsu stood, as if waiting for them. The generous curves of its human host were accented by the glowing blue lines of light on deep robes. Aside from the armored shoulder pads it looked more like a woman drifting naked on dark water than one enshrouded in a Kamui.

Tsumugu was the first down into the pit, and as he landed he heard that voice that sounded so familiar, *[This is it, your vengeance!]* Tsumugu wanted to respond that she should know by now that his memories were no mythology – she seemed more excited about his “vengeance” that he’d ever been. But this was just her way, watching his memories was like watching a movie to her. A movie with a lot of tear-jerking moments.

And besides, too much was happening. Moving faster than the human eye could see, Tsumugu raised his sword – a hardened life-fiber falchion – and the shield strapped to his left wrist – also life-fiber, with a blade on its circular edge. In his left hand he held a needle rifle, and even though it probably wouldn’t do any good he fired it as he charged anyway.

Even so, he was taken off guard when Ranketsu lifted its arm – the one without an arrow sticking out both sides -, and its long, tight sleeve with the cuffs that looked like flower petals unfurled. Inside, bioluminescent cyan light swirled in smooth, organic patterns that mesmerized both Tsumugu and Reiketsu.

*[Oh my, that’s beautiful – Oh shit!]*

*Oh my, that’s beautiful – Oh shit!* They thought as one, as suddenly the lights pulsed white hot and a blast of what could only be described as pure blue light flew from the sleeve instantly. Only the sheer instinct of a hardened soldier saved them, as Tsumugu lifted his shield and tucked his knee into a slide just at the last moment.

In one perfect, frozen moment that would leave afterimages on everyone’s eyes, the shaft of light appeared, deflecting off the shield at an angle to slice telephone poles down the road clean in half, and then it was gone again. Everyone froze on the edges of the crater, momentarily stunned and appalled at what had just happened. But Tsumugu was too close now. He got up, staring into the Kamui’s furious eyes, bulging from its spiky pauldrons with evident hatred for the puny fleshy creature that defied it. Tsumugu could see it how Reiketsu saw it – an aura of cold, a vast and oozing body crammed into those robes. *Now I know how Ryuko felt. Come on then!*

And the Kamui screeched at him. The mouth of its human host opened further than seemed possible and a guttural, inhuman noise issued force. It raised its arm to fire another beam of blue light, but Tsumugu was on top of it before it got it out, and Nonon wasn't far behind. Ranketsu leapt back, but it was even faster than Rosuketsu, if that were possible. In a blur of motion daggers expanded in its hands, and everything descended into chaos again.

This time, the battle was short and brutal. Rosuketsu flew off with Takamori, nursing the wounds in Minazuki's body. But Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu, with their twin hosts, zoomed down onto the battle, cackling as they did. Houka and Ira took Yuriketsu (or rather Houka did most of the work, and Ira tried his best) while Aikuro danced off into the rubble, loosing arrows as he did to draw Sumiretsu off.

The first clash of Kamui in this desolate industrial wasteland had been a whirling vortex of violence too fast for human eyes to follow. This was many times worse. Blows and parries, precise little pivots and giant leaping bounds and pounces, several more huge light blasts from Ranketsu (fortunately all misses) – it was a deadly, swirling kaleidoscope of blades and glowing lights. The steam and the flames exhaled by the fighting Kamui obscured the air, and blasts of compressed air leveled the landscape around them whenever blades clashed. Later, Houka and Shiro would watch and rewatch the security camera recordings of this battle, taking detailed notes on the first pitched battle of the superhuman era. But for now it was almost impossible to even think.

“Hi therre!” Unexpectedly, the host of Yuriketsu – with her too-wide smile and freckly cheeks – spoke in a shrill voice, artificially filled with flirtatious fun, “Oh! I love your Kamui! What a byyyyeautiful color!” It addressed Houka with a moist wink. Her thin body twisted sensuously with each passing blow, and Yuriketsu's combat form complimented this with a bodice shaped like a constricting velvet corset, fluffy little skirts with brilliant sequins, and banded lights on arms and legs that made their contours fuzzy and indistinct with each swing and kick.

“What the hell is this! Nui all over again I swear!” He grunted as he blocked a slash from the long halberd it carried.

“Only, it'd look even *better* without all that icky human DNA, doncha think?”

*[You'd better shut that thing up Houka, or else I swear...]* He could feel fear and rage from Misaki, billowing and making him sick to his stomach. Meanwhile, Yuriketsu's attention turned to Ira.

“Aw, lookit – you're bleeding!” She giggled, then gasped, “Oh! I wonder if you'll be able to keeep up!”

In all this chaos, Nonon remained calm. She only had to feel the rapidly closing aura from Rei and Furashada – quite a bright one – and then further out the auras of Uzu, Shiro and Ryuko somewhere in the city, to know that all they had to do was stay alive and then these things would be fucked. It couldn't have been more than a minute since the battle began when her prayers were answered. And just it time; Ranketsu had almost worn Tsumugu down with a flurry of blows and his fingers were nicked and bleeding.

“AAAAAAAHH!” With a wordless cry Rei and Furashada soared over the side of the crater like an artillery shell, crashing down on top of Ranketsu and skidding off with her at top speed, blasting through everything in their past, “GET THE HELL AWAY FROM MY FRIENDS!”

Ranketsu screeched at her too, and fired beams of light in random directions from both hands, but it was only when they skidded to a halt and Rei lifted her hands up to bring her blade – an axe that looked altogether too big for her tiny body – down on its head that it managed to kick her off.

But now the battle had turned. Almost as soon as Rei arrived Uzu was there too, and he leapt onto Sumiretsu and drove her back with Aikuro. And that brilliant aura, outshining even the pure Kamui, was very close now. Ryuko was coming.

A new understanding passed through the Kamui. They would not win this way. As one, their feet left the ground and – with a chipper, “I’ll kill ya next time!” from Yuriketsu – they zoomed off at great speed, vanishing into the smoke.

And it was over. The Kamui had been driven back, but just barely. Nobody had the energy left for much cheering.

~~~~~

When Satsuki finally managed to get to the prison cleanup crews and triage were already there. The Kamui Corps (plus Ryuko) were sitting on the rubble, powered down and exhausted, going through a sort of rudimentary debrief. Which basically amounted to talking about things that had freaked them out and groaning “well what the fuck”. Houka had just finished describing how freaky Yuriketsu was when Satsuki stepped out of the helicopter, and everyone nodded a respectful hello.

Well, everyone except Ryuko. She grinned and got to her feet, and when Satsuki looked at her, they both seemed to visibly soften with relief. Nonon watched all this with interest.

*[I mean they **are** sisters. You think they woundn’t be happy to see each other?]* Saiban addressed what she was thinking. Since the battle had calmed down and Nonon could think, her phone call with Satsuki the previous night was all she cared about. She’d watched the interaction between Rei and Ryuko carefully, and was surprised to see they just... didn’t even acknowledge each other. And when she’d had the gall to ask Rei to her face, “So what’s the deal with you and Ryuko, huh? That over?” She’d gotten a very interesting reaction.

Rei had stammed, “Well, she -,” And stopped herself. *No, we can’t say that, can we? Nobody can know.*

*[No. It would ruin both Mother and Satsuki]* Furashada replied, and so Rei had finished, “I’d actually rather not talk about it, I’m sorry.”

The other Kamui could sense Furashada’s sadness at being deprived of their creator’s closeness. They (especially Misaki and Tekketsu) thought it a bit silly to be so attached – sure, she was nice to be around, but they were self sufficient beings with their own wearers – but then they could also see how being constantly in contact with that reassuring, warm aura could be nice. The feeling of general sympathy and sadness was felt by their wearers too, and soon the whole ensemble was darkened by the gloom of being around Ryuko and Rei at that moment.

And nobody could feel it more than Ryuko. Hell, the moment she’d seen Rei, a powerful feeling of guilt and confusion had stabbed her. *Oh my god, I’ve wronged her so much,* she realized, and then the whole weekend – that weird sauna-sex thing Satsuki had done, the feeling she’d be so sure of that one day they’d be free to go public, the promise that they would continue this secret affair for

the sake of Satsuki's sanity – came crashing down on her. And she realized with a sinking feeling that what she felt for Rei was *nothing* compared to that. So what if they could have a future together she never could with Satsuki? What an insignificant thing!

*I just want to go back there.*

But then when Rei glanced at her with the glowering look, one Ryuko (correctly) took to mean Rei was trying to tell if she was sorry and so, so desperately hoping she was, the guilt pounded in her skull. When she overheard the Kamui's conversation, Saiban (his perception no doubt tinted by Nonon's) asking why they were even together in the first place, Furashada desperately trying to defend their relationship, she felt it even worse. *I don't want them to doubt me. I want to be there for them!* And they felt her guilt, and it only compounded things even more.

And so Ryuko just mostly glowered at the ground until Satsuki showed up. Satsuki would fix everything; she was so smart. She must've had this planned out since the beginning.

Satsuki meanwhile felt a stab of an uncomfortable, surreal feeling when she saw Ryuko. The memories of The Weekend came back to her too, but seeing Ryuko standing there with all the rest cast it all in a very different light. It didn't even feel real. It was like it was someone else whose hands had crept across Ryuko's naked skin, performing the movements of the purification ritual and making her squirm and gasp. It was like when she first realized she was gay – she felt sure the contents of her heart were exposed to the open air, and everyone could see how transformed she was. But she knew from years of experience that even her closest friends were oblivious to such things.

But Nonon did see something. She saw Ryuko suddenly perk up and smile, Rei's face go blank and glassy, Satsuki give the subtlest of twitches of discomfort. And she felt from Saiban how Ryuko's aura had suddenly changed to one of pure relief and happiness – making all the Kamui and by extension their wearers rejoice to see Satsuki arrive. A worming feeling of disgust seized her. Oh fuck, it was all *true*, wasn't it?

"Spare me the details, I've been apprised en route," Satsuki announced, "You all did very well. I'm so glad to see there are no major injuries. The other attack sites have all been cleaned up, and civilian casualties were kept to a minimum. We have done all but prevent Takamori Kiryuin's escape, and considering the circumstances I'd consider that a victory. Congratulations."

"Oh, ah, thanks, Satsuki," Nonon answered even though, for the first time she could remember, she didn't want anything to do with her best friend and idol. What the *hell* did she think she was doing, standing there smiling back at that *bitch* in plain sight of everyone. "I'm just glad it wasn't a complete disaster."

Instantly, Nonon's mind switched gears. Of course. This was all Ryuko's fault. She must have known what Ragyo had done to Satsuki, and though Nonon had always assumed Satsuki was stronger than Stockholm syndrome she had to admit it made sense. With the lipstick and the red eyeliner, she looked so much like her. She even wore that stupid army jacket loose, so that it hung around her arms and exposed her bare shoulders.

*What? Ryuko's not nearly cruel enough - or smart enough - to think of something like that. Just to fuck her own sister? I mean, I wouldn't put **wanting** to past her, but actually going through with it? But she's always affected Satsuki in some stupid way, ever since she first showed up... I guess I just don't know her as well as I thought I did.* From that moment on, Nonon's heart was hardened against Ryuko. She wouldn't forgive her for making Satsuki do something so awful. Saiban

watched her come to this decision, and although he thought the logic seemed right, he declined to share it with the other Kamui.

“Indeed, you’ve all done so much more than I can ever thank you for. Especially you, Ira. And Tekketsu, of course. Holding off the first Kamui on your own until reinforcements arrived, that was no small feat. Although I see you did not make it out unscathed”

Of course, Ira was oblivious to all the turmoil going on in Nonon. He looked up from changing his bandage, smiling, “We only did our duty, and even then, they still managed to escape with the most valuable prisoner. However, if you were looking for some way to thank us, there is one thing I’d like,” Satsuki raised an eyebrow in curiosity, “Do you remember that man over there?” Ira pointed to Itsuki, who was getting some minor wounds treated by a medic.

“Oh yes, that is the man who attempted to assassinate me, is he not? The one who turned and gave us the location of the first REVOCs base?”

And Ira told the whole story of Itsuki, and how he shot and crippled Takamori, forcing Rosuketsu to retreat or lose the whole point of the attack. He concluded by saying, “I’d like for you to pardon him.”

“Of course. I’ll meet with him as soon as tomorrow. That’s great news, Ira,” She smiled, a soft and genuine smile. It had been so long ago that the project of deprogramming had begun. Not only had it worked, it had paid off beautifully. She stood there, admiring the wreckage in something close to satisfaction for a moment, until Ryuko spoke.

“So, I guess now’s the part where you want me to go kick all their asses, huh?” She put her arms behind her head, stretching in a languid, laid-back manner. Satsuki looked at her questioningly, and she went on, “You remember, I said once that I knew I’d get dragged back in again. I’m okay with that.”

“Oh, fuck off!” Nonon shouted. The arrogance! “I didn’t train for years just so that you could steal the spotlight again!”

Ryuko looked over at her in shock. “Well, I just thought…”

Uzu smiled and took over, putting a hand on Nonon’s shoulder, “Nonon’s got a point. It’s our turn to save everyone now. Let’s face it, if anyone earned an early retirement from this shit, it’s you. You just hang back, help us train, and we’ll put a stop to them, just watch,” Ryuko hadn’t even considered that – she knew Satsuki always went for the simplest, more efficient tactics, and as she saw it that meant throwing the strongest fighter at them and letting that be that. But now Uzu and all the rest were smiling at her, nodding reassuringly. Well, except Rei and Nonon, but it was still enough. It was like they could feel that she’d resigned herself to this.

“You guys…” She couldn’t help but be touched. Her fingers protested, just a little. They wanted to punch something. But no, those days were behind her.

“After all, why else would you have made the Kamui?”

Satsuki turned back to face everyone, “And if you remain here rather than going out looking for trouble, that’s our strongest defense here in Tokyo. It’s a plan I approve of, what do you say to that, Ryuko?”

“I, uh, yeah,” Ryuko concluded, “You guys are right. You all took care of it today without me, maybe I got ahead of myself there.”

“So, what will we do now then?” Houka asked, “I suppose you’ll declare a state of emergency, Satsuki?”

“Mmm, I think not,” Satsuki hummed, “I want to show the country that it has nothing to fear from REVOCS or life-fibers anymore. If I seized control away from the democratically elected government,” (never mind that the government was still far from up and running, and was mostly still under her thumb) “It would ruin all our progress.”

“So... what are we doing then?”

“Good question. For us, we have one top priority – we cannot allow our new world to fall back to the way it was. If the people lose trust in us, or the country collapses, that is our lose condition.”

“Wait, you’re saying we just need to defend?” Nonon was incredulous, “Why can’t we go find their main base and tear it the hell down?”

“Well, that is our win condition, is it not? It will be a long and difficult process to find it, but when we do we can rip them out from the roots,” The Kamui Corps grinned at that. That sounded suitably final. “And we will find them. It’s only a matter of time. Time has never been our side before, but now we have you Kamui. You can absorb life-fibers and become stronger. Soon enough, you will be powerful enough to make short work of our enemies. This is a war we’ve already won, so long as we can do it without becoming a terror to the people we lead.”

~~~~~

Sufficiently reassured by this, the Kamui Corps began packing up and heading for home, to take a well deserved rest after the day’s chaos. Ryuko was about to go too, her phone had been buzzing with texts from Mako, Mataro, and her adopted parents all day – they were all terribly curious about what the hell all the excitement was about, if not as worried as they probably should’ve been.

“One moment, Ryuko. I’d like to have a word in private,” Satsuki stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Shiro, could you come along too, please?”

“Certainly,” Shiro already knew what this was about, and when they were settled in Satsuki’s helicopter with the doors shut he took a deep breath, knowing this was bound to be a tough conversation.

“So, what’s up?”

“Should I begin, or would you rather?” Satsuki asked Shiro.

“I think it would sound better coming from you.”

“Quite,” Satsuki said and then paused to think of how to proceed, “Ryuko, there is another reason why you can’t fight our new enemy head on. Tell me, what do remember about when Ragyo died.”

“Wait, seriously? Let me think... well, she ripped her heart out, yelled a lot about how the life-fibers would just come back, and then she popped it with her nails, and just kinda... disintegrated into life-fibers. And then those faded to nothing, and she was gone. I don’t know. I think that’s what happened,” Ryuko had trouble dredging up an accurate picture of it. She’d been too flush with triumph, and besides, all of that was overshadowed by what happened immediately afterwards.

Satsuki shook her head. “I’m afraid that isn’t quite right. Ryuko, Shiro and Houka recently discovered that those life-fibers didn’t just fade to nothing, as you put it. Ryuko, you absorbed them.”

“... I-I’m sorry, what?”

“It’s true. Her physical body may have crumbled in space, but just as your real self is not your physical body, her real self – Shiro’s calling it an ‘anchor’ but I’ll call it what it really is: her soul – her soul lives on. Inside of you.”

Satsuki kept on explaining to the best of her ability what was in the report Izanami had sent her, but Ryuko didn’t hear a word of it. Everything faded out, all she could hear was the pulse in her ears, rocketing faster and faster. All she could see was Satsuki eyes, heavy with fear and sadness.

*I’m not supposed to love my sister. I knew it was wrong. She’s in there. She’s **making** me!*

Ryuko wanted to blurt that it wasn’t true, it couldn’t be. But as much as Shiro was prone to his lunacies, he wouldn’t dare get something this important wrong. And she knew it wasn’t. Everything suddenly made sense. Her fingers, the very same fingers with which she’d sewed life-fibers - the enemy - together to give life to her Kamui, they *burned* as something horrible wormed into her stomach.

She was sinking into the abyss in a submersible, only a thin sheet of glass between her and the infinite night.

“Ryuko? Ryuko!” Satsuki’s arms were suddenly around her head, snapping her back to reality. Tears were running down her face – she hadn’t even noticed that in her panic. Shiro blew a big breath from his mouth, as if to say “*Oh boy, here we go*”.

“I’m... I’m okay,” She gently unwound Satsuki’s hands, rubbed her eyes, managed to keep herself from fully crying. “That... but it’s okay, right?” She immediately jumped to the conclusion that she’d overreacted, mind going a mile a minute. “I mean, I’ve absorbed tons of life-fibers. Maybe she’s just gone, like erased.”

“I only wish that were true. But Ryuko, it gets worse.”

“No...”

“I have to tell you the truth Ryuko. Just, please stay calm. It’s going to be alright. This is bad news, but we’ll get through it, yes?”

“Mhm?” Ryuko wiped her eyes again. *God fucking dammit Satsuki, I’d do anything for you. But you expect me to believe that, when she’s alive **inside me** right this moment?* “Tell me.”



“We believe the enemy has found a way, a ritual or a surgery of something, that they could use to reverse the two of you. Put her in charge. Allow her to... possess your body.”

Ryuko thought she'd gotten over the initial panic, and that now she'd be able to take it on the chin. But she hadn't expected *that*.

“What! No no no no that – that *can't* be right! Shiro, tell her she's got it wrong!”

Shiro looked her dead in the eyes, face sad but set, “I wish that were the case. But it's in the book you took from the REVOCS base. I could probably perform the ritual myself if I were crazy enough to try.”

“You fucking **WHAT!**” Ryuko roared, not hearing him exactly right. Thinking he wanted to try it to see if there was a way to get rid of Ragyo for good, Ryuko was suddenly standing up, grabbing him by his collar.

“I'm not *going* to! I would never!” Suddenly terrified, he held his hands up in surrender. After much shouting from Satsuki, Shiro and Izanami Ryuko finally let him drop.

“You're not touching me! I'm not your goddamn guinea pig!”

“Nobody's going to do anything to you Ryuko. I'd never let them,” Satsuki said reassuringly.

“Yes, I said *'if I were crazy enough to try'*, not that I *would* try. All I want is to keep this ritual from happening at all costs, believe me. If Ragyo were to return, in your body, it would probably be curtains for humanity.”

“Indeed. That's why you will not be fighting this time. We won't allow you to be captured by the enemy, I promise.”

Ryuko remembered those life-fiber starching bullets that she'd nearly been shot by during the REVOCS base raid. If those had hit... She shuddered, imagining her body with rainbow light spilling out from her hair. Satsuki smiling, just purely happy to see her back after being captured then...

“*Hello, my foolish little Satsuki,*” Not her voice, coming from her mouth. But her hand plunging right through Satsuki's body and ending her in an instant. And in her imagination, she would be forced to watch the look of utter agony and betrayal on Satsuki's face. For an eternity.

“Let me out of this helicopter,” She said darkly.

“Ryuko? Are you alright?” Satsuki asked gently

“What do you think!” She blurted, and those she hadn't meant to tears and rage showed on her face again. She was a danger to everyone. She flung open the door, and it smashed off its hinges and spun across the floor.

“Don't do anything rash!” Satsuki called. *Don't do anything rash. All my life, that's all I've ever done. If I fuck up again, everyone's going to die. And I'm gonna be stuck watching her live in my body. Forever.*

“I just... just... how are you so calm right now?”

“What makes you think I am?” Satsuki responded, and her voice nearly broke. And for the first time Ryuko noticed how much Satsuki’s hands were shaking. She couldn’t stop them, it was like she was in an earthquake.

It was overwhelming. And so Ryuko did the only thing she did nearly as well as acting rash. She ran away. She got as far as the back side of the hill the prison was built into before she collapsed, out of sight of everyone, and sobbed until she couldn’t anymore.

Her stomach writhed even fiercer than before. It was like she was going to give birth to a monster.

No. She *was* the monster. Just like she’d always known deep down.

## Chapter End Notes

I've been working the reveal at the end for a while now. I hope y'all like it. Or maybe I should say I hope you don't, since after all it's nothing good.

# Monday from Hell: And Then They Went Home

October 2066

~~~~~  
“So your friend is going free then?” Mako asked, gently sliding a tiny pair of sewing scissors between layers of gauze. Despite how clumsy and spastic she usually was, when it came to treating a wound she could be quite delicate.

Ira was laying across their bed while she leaned over his belly, and he nodded, hands behind his head “Satsuki and a few other high-level government types have to approve, but that’s just a formality. He’ll be free soon, I have no doubt, although what he’ll do with himself then I can’t say. Doubt anyone would want to hire a former REVOCs assassin.”

“You must be so proud,” Mako murmured appreciatively. She’d made Ira tell and retell the story of the days events, then called her parents and Mataro and had him tell them too. But she kept coming back to Itsuki’s role in the tale, mostly because she’d already heard all about him from Ira and by this point basically considered him a close friend.

“Well, I don’t know about *proud*...”

[*One must be honest, Ira*] Tekketsu chided in a very proper tone, although still one ringing with amusement. She watched Mako replace the bandages on Ira’s wound from a coat hanger hung over the bed, well within range for him to hear and feel her presence.

“Oh alright, I suppose I am a little proud – but in him, not me. All I did was treat him how you would’ve treated him Mako.”

“Awwww!” Mako gushed, then made a playful little noise at Buster, one of the two German Shepherds they’d adopted so long ago. “AWWWW!” She exclaimed even louder as Buster nosed at Ira’s hand and got a head pat in return, “Lookit, he knows you’re hurt! Sorry Buster, you can’t lick this wound,” (Mako let the dogs lick little scrapes and cuts, claiming that “dog kisses help it heal – they wouldn’t lick themselves if it weren’t true!”) “*Someone* put too much Neosporin on it, its just all goop!” She held up an absolutely sopping bandage to Ira with a pointed look.

Ira shrugged, “It’s a disinfectant, right?”

“You don’t need this much, not at all!”

“Well, one of the medics did it!”

“Yeah, and then you redid it yourself! I’m a doctor’s daughter, I can tell!”

Ira didn’t have much to say to that. “I wanted to make sure it fit under Tekketsu when she powered down,” He explained lamely.

Mako accepted that with a shrug and a kind of “Mhm” noise. She didn’t work in silence for long before laughing and starting up again, “You know what’s funny that I just realized? You

got cut exactly where your bellyband goes, didn't you."

Tekketsu mumbled something vague and apologetic. Ira chuckled and said, "Don't remind me. Tekketsu's still a little sore about it."

"That is so sweet! Y'know, I could always – well, maybe not always – but I could always tell when Senketsu was worried about Ryuko even though he couldn't talk, and it's the same with you two!"

*[I can feel the pain, I don't know if she realizes]*

"Tekketsu says she can feel the pain, so that's no surprise."

"Whoaaa... Can you feel hers too?"

"Yes, I think I can. Although she hasn't been too badly damaged yet."

*[Or hopefully ever.]*

"Or hopefully ever," Ira concluded.

"Wha-but that's crazy!" Mako exclaimed. Suddenly she set her tools down and ran over to Tekketsu, slapping her hands on her front and rubbing them up and down.

*[Pfffft! Pfha-ha-ha-Ira! Tell your little woman to stop!]* That reaction, as Tekketsu's eyes bulged open and she squirmed as little as she was able, took Ira by surprise. He couldn't help but laugh himself – he'd never heard such an open laughter from Tekketsu before. *[It's not funny!]* she squealed.

"Okay, okay Mako, that's enough. You're tickling her. And yes, I can feel it quite well," He finally pulled her away from Tekketsu, but she still squealed with excitement anyway.

"So cool! Oh man, I want a Kamui too!"

That made Ira sit bolt upright despite the pain, suddenly completely stone faced, "You aren't serious, are you?"

"Aaah! You'll reopen it!" Mako shouted, pushing him back down by the shoulders as though she was strong enough to move him an inch. He did lay back down, but that didn't change the sudden change in his mood.

"Mako, you know I can't allow that, right?"

"Why not? I wanna help too! And I'm supposed to be like really good at Kamuis and stuff – compatible and all that, right?"

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that just because you can doesn't mean you should? It's far too dangerous."

Mako pouted, stopped re-dressing Ira's wound and put her arms over his shoulders, looking him straight in the eye, "You forget I went to Honoujji? I know a thing or two about danger too."

Ira squirmed. Just like Mako to bring up something so serious out of the blue, “That may be, but I still can’t approve of it.”

Mako kept staring at him with those big, pleading eyes. This tactic was usually effective, but this was too important. “I feel like you’re not taking me serious,” She got back up as she said this, “Meatball is, look”. Meatball was their other dog, Buster’s sister (they’d been together at the shelter and it seemed wrong to separate them). They’d both agreed they’d come up with a real name eventually, but it had been more than a year now and they were still calling her Meatball. She was more well behaved, and sat calmly in her dog bed, watching Mako putter around.

“I am taking it very seriously. It’s admirable that you want to help, but there’s a lot you can do without being a... well, a soldier. I just don’t approve.”

*[Now hold on, isn’t there a chance of someone trying to kidnap her as a way to get to the rest of us?]* No doubt Mako being held hostage would have quite an effect on the entire Kamui Corps, Ira had to admit *[She would actually be safer with the extra protection]*.

“Tekketsu! Whose side are you on?”

*[The side of not having every go horribly wrong I suppose]* Tekketsu shot back with lighthearted snark, but she had to admit she did have a soft spot for Mako. In part because she could feel Ira’s feelings for her, but also this sort of weird, gentle kind of fondness she herself had developed. Somehow, she felt much older than the exuberant little human, like she needed to look out for her and protect her from a big, cynical world.

“What’d she say?” Mako asked.

Ira sighed, “She took your side. Says if you had a Kamui you’d be safe from people trying to take you hostage.”

“Oh! She’s right! See, even a smart Kamui like her thinks it’s a good idea!”

*[Aww, how sweet!]* If Kamui could blush, Tekketsu would be. Ira had to smile at this uncharacteristic outburst – that was just Mako for you.

“No, you two still don’t understand. Mako, I can’t allow you to become a murderer.”

*[Oh.]*

“Whu?”

“No, listen. When you had your Goku uniform, you only fought Ryuko, the Covers, and some of Nui’s clones. Now, there are real people who we’re fighting against. And some of them are evil, yes, but some are just desperate and confused.”

“Like Itsuki...” Mako nodded.

“Yes, like Itsuki. And the time will come when we have to kill some of them to win, and to protect people. Mako, you’re the only one in our circle who hasn’t committed a single murder. I can’t let you change that.”

“But Ryuko hardly ever killed anybody!”

“Hardly ever. But she still did. You saw her chop Nui’s arms off with no remorse – she’s very brave but still, that’s not you.”

“But I won’t,” Mako murmured plaintively, “I would never kill someone!”

“I know. But sometimes all that power just makes it too easy to solve problems with violence. Overwhelming violence. You can even kill people by accident. Satsuki turned down a Kamui because she knew that was true, the rest of us have had to make our peace with it.”

*[For what it’s worth, I’m sorry Ira]* Tekketsu could feel the weight this had to Ira – understood what Mako *represented* to him.

“Well I don’t believe that! People without Kamui do bad things all the time too, why would that change anything?” Mako said huffily. She whipped out her phone and started fussing with it.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going over your head!” Mako held up her phone and showed a contact picture of Ryuko smiling. “Ryuko’s my bestie *and* my sister and besides, she’s the one who can actually make ‘em anyway.”

Ira shook his head and smiled in resignation. He couldn’t stay upset, she just looked so cute when she was resolute like that, “I guess it never was my decision anyway. Maybe you’re right, who knows? Either way, it can’t hurt to see what she thinks.”

~ “Hey Mako,” ~ When Ryuko answered, her voice was clearly despondent and lifeless. Mako frowned immediately.

“Ryuko? What’s wrong?”

~ “Nothing. I’m just... worn out, I guess.” ~

“Really? Because it sounds like there’s something wrong, and you want to tell me,” She said sweetly, “Is it Rei again?”

~ “...What did you call to ask me about, Mako?” ~ Mako could hear a faint rustling sound that she correctly interpreted as Ryuko rolling over in bed.

“Oh, I, uh, I just wanted to ask if you’d maybe make me a Kamui? Y’know one day. Just for safety and all that.”

Ryuko sighed, ~ “I don’t think I’m gonna be making any more Kamui. We’ve got enough already.” ~

“Oh. Well, are you sure you don’t want to tell me what’s going on?”

~ “Maybe someday, Mako. But just... not right now.” ~

“Okay. I’ll call you later, okay?”

~ “Goodnight,” ~ Ryuko finished and hung up.

Ira raised a curious eyebrow. “Something’s really wrong, and she doesn’t want to tell me,” Mako said simply, almost on the verge of tears just from thinking about it. She got back to working silently for a few minutes. Then, Ira’s phone buzzed.

“Huh, an urgent email from Shiro,” Ira opened it, and began reading the very same report Satsuki had gotten that morning. Mako watched as his eye widened in alarm. “Oh, oh my God.”

“What’s up?”

“You’re gonna want to see this. I think I found out what’s upsetting Ryuko so much.”

~~~~~

“Ugh my hair’s a rat’s nest!” Uzu shouted over the roar of the shower, “I got so used to being able to put my hair however I wanted, and now transforming and running all over the city just wrecks it.”

“I know!” Nonon replied, visible only in a vague outline through the wavy glass shower door. “I keep wearing Saiban without sunscreen I’m gonna get so many freckles!”

“That’s ‘cuz you’re so pale,” Uzu said simply, and when she looked at him and even through the glass and the dripping water he could see the venom in her gaze he chuckled and grinned, “Love ya babe!”

“Yeah I fucking *know* it’s ‘cuz I’m pale! Shut up!” She hurled a sudsy shampoo bottle over the door just to prove a point, but Uzu held out a hand and let the cylindrical bottle roll along his arm, flipped it over to his other one and launched it right back into the shower where it landed perfectly upright on the shelf – all without looking. It was ridiculous that he could just *do* things like that – shingantsu was one hell of a drug – but although he always said anyone could learn it Nonon knew she wasn’t patient enough for all the meditation required.

“Wait, you’re distracting me!” Nonon went on, “Look, I know it’s hard to believe, but I can’t think of another reason why she would bring Ryuko without telling me. And then the thing where she called her ‘dear’ which, like, I’m sure she didn’t mean to do, it just slipped out. I-I mean, you shoulda seen how they looked at each other when Satsuki first got there today, you wouldn’t doubt it. Or how Rei was glaring at them – ‘cuz that’s totally why they broke up, Rei must’ve found out somehow.”

“Yeah, it is hard to believe. As in I can’t believe it. Especially not the part about Ryuko seducing her. You really think she’s got Satsuki – the master of manipulation – wrapped around her finger just by acting like their mother? I don’t even know why you’d think that!”

“What do you mean why?” Nonon said, but then she remembered that only Shiro, Soroi, and she herself knew all the abuse that Ragyo had inflicted upon her elder daughter, “Look, yeah, it does sound *absurd*, but just... think about what she was like in *public*, or what she was like with Nui. And fill in the gaps.”

“Oh. Ohhhh,” Uzu stopped messing with his hair for a moment and gaped into the mirror as he fully processed that revelation. “Wait, but that still doesn’t explain why she’d want to fuck her.”

“You’ve never heard of Stockholm Syndrome? Simplest way I can put it. Look, it’s not like she actually went and said ‘oh wow, my sister looks just like Mom,’ it’s all subconscious and shit.”

“And you think Ryuko figured that out.”

“I mean, look at her – she never used to wear makeup, she dresses more like her, and then there’s the whole fashion design thing.”

“Yeah, but none of that’s *proof*. It’s just a conspiracy theory.”

“Conspiracy theory!!” Nonon shouted. She’d expected that Uzu wouldn’t buy it at first, but she had also expected him to at least take her seriously.

“You know Ryuko wouldn’t do that to Satsuki. Only a real scumbag would, and you’re asking me to believe that one of my best friends, who happens to be the reason any of us are alive at all, is scum on that level. I’m being a hundred percent straight with you: I’ve heard you out, but there’s no way I’d ever buy that. Now, if you told me it was consensual, mutual, no mind games, I mean that *could* happen-,”

“– No, Satsuki would *never*,” Nonon cut him off quickly. “That’s just...” Uzu could see her shudder at the thought, “Ick!”

“Yeah, well what you think happened is like ick times a thousand. Are we done talking about this?”

Nonon sighed, “Yeah, I guess. I mean, I don’t have any real proof. I just know Satsuki very well, she might seem to wind people around her finger but when it comes to anything emotional she’s... completely stunted. And she one-time told me she used to have an unrequited crush, and I’ll bet you anything the person she was crushing on was Ryuko.”

“Well, that sounds more like mutual to me. And if it was, let’s be real here, would there really be an issue if that were true? I mean, it’s not like they could have inbred kids.”

“FUCKING WHAT?” Nonon shouted, whirling around to face him.

“What? I’m just saying that they didn’t know each other growing up, so like if it’s behind closed doors who *really* cares?”

“YOU’RE JUST SAYING THAT BECAUSE YOU THINK THEY’RE HOT AND YOU KNOW IT!” She continued screeching, but at that moment Nonon’s phone buzzed and made the entire counter vibrate. Uzu’s phone was in the bedroom with the Kamui, but he heard it vibrate too. He could feel Seijitsu interrupt the conversation she was having with Saiban to ask what that noise was.

“Hold that thought...” He said as he read the lock screen, “Urgent message from Shiro. I’m unlocking your phone.”

“Wait! You’re gonna get pomade all over it!”

“Too late!” Uzu said, opening the report and starting to read. He’d barely gotten through the first paragraph when: “Holy shhhhhhit.”



“What?”

“Okay, not saying I believe you now, but you’re gonna want to see this.”

~~~~~

Down in Izanami’s central processor, Houka’s phone began buzzing repeatedly. A stream of all-caps texts crossed the screen.

“Well, Nonon knows.”

“It’s too bad,” Shiro said, looking up at the central “brain” component of Izanami above him, “I would have liked to break the news gently. But it’s important they all know quickly. And I also think it might be too much for Ryuko if everyone found out in front of her.”

“Mmm. How did she take it, by the way?”

“Oh, about as well as you’d expect. Better, actually, I thought she’d knock down a building or two but all she did was rip the door off the helicopter and try to throttle me.”

“I’ll bet that was your fault, anyway,” Houka said mildly.

~[*Oh, it definitely was*]~ Izanami spoke through the artificial voice they’d made for her. Houka had developed a portable version for Misaki – it rested on his lapel like an ugly metal boutonniere. They’d distribute these to the others soon, but for now it was a secret to the four of them.

“Yes,” Shiro nodded morosely, face a little red, “It’s a shame really, I did some reading on how doctors tell patients they’ve got cancer, lot of good it did me.”

~[*You are known to mumble*]~ Misaki commented.

“That aside, cancer? Isn’t that a bit much?”

“I think in terms of emotional impact it’s quite similar. And it could be just as life threatening.”

~[*You don’t know that! Mother’s tough, she’ll get through this,*]~ Misaki shot back fiercely.

“With our help, it will never be a problem. Probably.”

Houka pushed away from his laptop, looked at Shiro thoughtfully. “Probably,” He chuckled, “We really are just kids playing with matches.”

“That’s how progress is made. It’s what we’ve always done.”

“Oh I agree. It’s just I feel bad for this particular match. Not her fault she gets set on fire so often.”

~~~~~

~ “Ryuko? Are you alright? I read the report.” ~

“Rei?”

~ “Ryuko? I-I just called in to make sure you were okay.” ~

“Rei!” There was so much Ryuko wanted to say, but just thinking about it she descended into sobs long before she could.

~ “Hold on! W-wait, I’ll be right over!” ~

When Rei got there all she had to do was buzz at the penthouse door and she was let right up. Ryuko thought she had her emotions under control, but since Rei called she could do nothing but lay there and sniffle, chest heaving with heavy breaths.

Rei had been thinking of what Ryuko had said about Satsuki: “*It’s like a disease*”. She’d been thinking about how that made sense, but she only understood it when Ryuko sat up to see her, eyes red and distraught. How was this the same woman who had loomed large over the defcon machine like an angel of death?

Instantly everything that had happened between them over the last couple weeks was forgotten – no, not forgotten. Irrelevant.

“You shouldn’t’a come.”

“Don’t be stupid, you need someone to be with you right now.”

“Rei I don’t want to hurt you anymore. But it isn’t right. Not you, not Satsuki. I shouldn’t be with either of you. It’s all *her* who wants it.”

“Here. C’mere,” Rei scooped her into her arms. After having been away for so long Furushada sighed with relief being so close to her aura. “You’ll tear yourself apart this way. Look at me,” She directed Ryuko’s glassy eyes to hers, which were beginning to mist themselves at the sight of her misery, “I know. I get it. It’s okay.”

“No, no you don’t,” Ryuko looked away, disgusted that after everything it still felt nice to be in Rei’s arms. “Nobody’s ever had this happen to them before. I don’t even know what parts of me are me, and what parts are *her*. I can feel her, clawing at me inside.”

“I understand. You know I lived with her for so long, believed in her. You know how many times I feel the same way, you remember.”

“No. Satsuki said the same thing. But you’re alright, you’re still you.”

Rei followed Ryuko’s averted eyes over to the garbage can. Every piece of makeup she owned, every hair product, every piece of tight or skimpy or feminine clothing, they were all crammed haphazardly in there. Her sewing kit too.

Rei got up and walked over to it, picked up the sewing kit. Ryuko loved that thing. Rei burst into tears all over again, and Ryuko wasn’t far behind.

“I-I thought maybe that’d,” Ryuko sobbed, “That’d fight her. God, why doesn’t it ever end? Why does this have to be my life?”

They sat there crying and freaking out together until they couldn't anymore. Then Mako called, and the three of them had another good cry about it. Ryuko wanted so desperately to rein her emotions in - she cried too much lately, and this was just what Ragyo would want. *I'm done being scared.* She kept saying to herself, clenching her fists together. But there was nothing to punch, nothing to destroy to make the fear go away, except the horrid sinking feeling in her guts. Her little glass submersible had burst and the water was flooding in.

But it felt good to have Rei there, and Furashada and Mako. And when Mako finally hung up it was too easy, too comfortable, in spite of everything that had just happened. In spite of how much she'd wronged Rei she was right there, desperate to find some way to make this pain go away.

And when they woke up the next morning and Rei got up, dressed, and left without saying a word, face burning with discomfort, they both felt the awkward, resigned feeling of *ah shit, I guess we just did that.*

Eventually Ryuko lugged herself up to go to classes (Go to classes? Well, she had to do something with her day). Putting on her jacket, she found a carefully folded note. An address and some instructions, written in Satsuki's perfectly neat handwriting.

*\*Come at 9:00pm tomorrow.\**

*\*Don't knock, it's unlocked\**

*\*The door sticks so give it a good shove\**

For a moment she considered just not going. She'd be forgiven, of course. Better to just quit this horrible thing cold.

But she hadn't been able to quit Rei. She couldn't do it. And she remembered what Satsuki had said, about listlessness and needing Ryuko to feel herself again.

*She's already won, in all the ways that matter. I'm her.*

Ryuko nearly broke down again, but suddenly something new occurred to her. Something so exciting that she didn't even know what to do. Finally she decided to call Shiro. He was the only one she knew for sure would understand.

"There's a silver lining to all this," She said, "If Ragyo's still alive, that means Senketsu might be out there somewhere too."

~~~~~

Satsuki was late getting home. Press conferences, meetings with different officials, disaster cleanup, public appearances, it all dragged on and eventually she just had to reschedule some things to tomorrow morning. She hadn't even made time to talk to Itsuki yet, and she'd wanted to do that more than all the rest. But sleep eventually became the main priority.

When she finally did make it to her modest home, the tea kettle was already on.

"Hello?" She asked the air.

"In the den, miss," A voice she hadn't heard in weeks rang out.

“Soroi?” Her tired face was brightened by a surprised smile as she rounded the corner and saw her former butler and caretaker lounging comfortably in an armchair, book in hand, “What brings you here?”

“Why, considering the day’s events, I thought you might appreciate my coming out of retirement.”

“I, ah, that’s completely unnecessary. If anyone has earned an undisturbed retirement, it’s you.”

“Oh,” He raised his eyebrows, smiled, “Well, then I think I might sit here and finish my tea.”

“Mhm,” Satsuki hum-chuckled, “You might. I might join you; I think.”

“If it please you miss,” Soroi nodded. “Although I think you’ll find I like to steep mine a bit longer than you.”

There could be no more profound relief than what Satsuki felt, sitting there across from Soroi, not even reading or doing anything – just sipping tea. Even Ryuko might not have been as reassuring a sight.

Ryuko... that’s right, she’d instructed her to come over tomorrow. If Soroi came back (and she really hoped he did), there was no way he wouldn’t understand it all.

“Soroi, you know I’ve never kept anything from you, don’t you?”

“Yes miss, I know.”

Satsuki smiled in resignation, “I think you should know. Despite my best efforts, I remain a Kiryuin at heart. Ryuko too.” Soroi raised an eyebrow, nodded gently – neither too fast nor too slow, “You understand. I can’t ask you to forgive us.”

“Nor do you need to. I’ve served Kiryuins my entire life. I know – no matter what you and her have done – that you are no true Kiryuin, miss,” The kindly look in Soroi’s tired grey eyes left nothing unsaid. Satsuki’s smile broke naturally and with a sort of sweetness she could never intentionally replicate.

“Please, it’s about time you called me Satsuki.”

# What Do We Do Now: Due Deference

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October 2066

~~~~

The day after the REVOCS attack began in a surreally mundane manner. Ira visited the soldiers who had been wounded in the battle then went to oversee the cleanup of the gutted remains of the prison. Uzu went to his dojo, although despite his offering every one of his employees – all martial arts masters in their own right – was so adamant that he was too big and important to teach regular lessons that he actually didn't have anything to do. Nonon spent all morning writing an intensely uncomfortable feeling piece of ambient electronic music that fit her current mood perfectly. Houka, Shiro, Aikuro, and Tsumugu went back to the lab and carried on working just as usual. Satsuki was totally swamped, of course, and she had to do it without Rei; she still couldn't stand seeing Satsuki and instead spent the morning on a long call with her psychiatrist (dancing around the causes of her current distress until it became a pointless exercise). And Ryuko and Mako went to classes.

When Ryuko walked into her first lecture a hush fell over the hall. Everyone was staring at her, completely unashamed.

Because the location of the prison had been secret, there had been no reporters to see the Kamui fight. But all the other locations across the city had gotten extensive coverage and she featured in each of them – a red blur whizzing across the camera, leaving dead and unconscious REVOCS troops and stunned citizens in her wake. But she had nothing in her to meet their stares with magnanimity. She took her seat silently, head to the ground.

*If they knew what I really am, they'd tear me limb from limb until I didn't come back. And they'd be right to do it.*

Then someone started clapping. And then someone else. Soon, applause filled the hall. A seat was opened for her right in the center of the hall. Her head shot up from her laptop with a shy, stunned look. She wanted to say no, keep your seat, I'm fine in the back I was late anyway. But what good would that do? One look at the girl who gave up her seat told her that this moment was making her entire month.

*If they knew, they might try to destroy me. But long before they could do that, it would break their spirits.* Ryuko felt like she'd betrayed the entire world.

~~~~

So that was how the day started, but when classes were done and the dojo was closed and the rubble was finally cleared away and Satsuki had rescheduled her meeting with Itsuki *again* it came time for what would define the days of the REVOCS insurgency: war council.

When Ryuko arrived at the Research Complex, most of the council was already there. Gone was the man-cave of computers and empty energy drink cans that had been the center of the

secret lab – the room was almost two times its previous size and filled mostly with a broad black table. Screens descended from the gloom of a high ceiling, and the big chairs at each of the four corners each had a built-in control panel for them. Under the murmur of the gathered councilors there was an omnipresent droning of mechanic whirrs and clanks. Izanami's automatic construction components were reshaping the Research Complex from the ground up.

Taking in who was at the table, Ryuko was mortified to find herself walking into a very important government meeting. Each of the four sides of the table was a different branch, with their leadership seated at the corner seat on the left end. So it was Nonon, as head of the Kamui Corps, that was sitting directly across from the elevators, and in the brief moment that she first saw Ryuko shot her a glare of such unbridled hatred that Ryuko flinched. Off to her right sat the rest of Ryuko's friends, but their eyes betrayed a much more sympathetic concern when they saw her. Of course, they all knew better than to seem anything less than a united front to the rest of the government, so all these reactions were smoothed over before anyone else noticed.

Satsuki was next, heading the conventional military and intelligence side. Generals and spymasters sat to her right, mostly former Nudist Beach or Honoujji, but also a couple frail, elderly gentlemen in old fashioned suits – actual generals from the early 2000s, before everything went to shit.

Then, sitting directly opposite Nonon was the Interim Prime Minister, leading the economic and administrative side of the government with a lot of stoic, ordinary looking bureaucrats at his side.

Finally, Aikuro was at the righthand corner, taking a break from his position in the Kamui Corps to lead the science and environmental branch. Their numbers were very diverse, a multinational group of the best and the brightest from around the world – many of them refugees who had come to work at the Research Complex. As the Complex's (admittedly mostly figurehead) president, Aikuro was the obvious leader.

They all stood when Ryuko stepped into the hall.

"Lady Ryuko, you honor us," The Prime Minister said with a silky smile. He motioned towards his chair, "Please, allow me."

If the shock of seeing how the homey little man-cave had been transformed wasn't enough for Ryuko, having the *Prime-fucking-Minister* give up his seat to her sure did it. She stammered, "No, that's-that's fine, I'll just stand."

"Oh please, it's no trouble at all," He smiled, quite genuinely. He was young for a career politician, just entering his late thirties. Perfectly normal looking with no distinguishing features and a satisfactorily polite manner, he was highborn enough to satisfy the remaining dynastic megacorps and popular enough with the city he'd previously been mayor of to satisfy everyone else. More importantly, he was plenty capable of administrating but totally lacking in any big picture vision the could conflict with Satsuki's plans. If you had told her she had appointed the ideal puppet she would have denied it furiously – she really hadn't meant to. Her political instincts operated with or without her consent.

Presently Ryuko turned to Satsuki, who nodded slightly to indicate that this was okay, expected, and actually completely necessary. So Ryuko took the seat, the Prime Minister moved down, and all the other bureaucrats shifted down too until the lowest ranking was booted off. Just when it looked like he'd have to stand a wall panel opened and robot arm passed him a nice new chair.

*I outrank the Prime Minister;* Ryuko understood, watching as every sat down and murmured “Lady Ryuko” deferentially. Normally she might have yelled to knock it off, but the past few days had changed that. She didn’t want to get angry at anyone, afraid she might set something horrible loose upon them. And besides, she couldn’t possibly wreck Satsuki’s important meeting.

And so the meeting began, and boy was it just as boring as Ryuko knew it would be. She’d hoped to spend it playing a game on her laptop and trying to forget about her troubles, but that wasn’t possible now. She found that, even as Uzu gradually drifted off to sleep, she had to stay as attentive as she could. She could feel everyone’s eyes on her – Nonon’s, glaring as if to say “*yeah right, as if you could ever understand,*” Satsuki’s (she’d be so happy if Ryuko managed to actually learn something), and the other councilors who were awestruck and definitely expected her to play some kind of part. After they gave their presentations they looked both to her and Satsuki for approval, and she just had to kind of nod like she was following.

It turned out to be a good idea to listen though, because Ryuko quickly realized that a lot of this stuff would be important to her daily life for the foreseeable future:

Ryuko learned that the main purpose of the Kamui Corps until an enemy base to attack was located would be to defend against attacks on citizens and infrastructure – just how Nonon had been taking out occasional REVOCS terrorists when she was the only one with a Kamui. And so the entire Research Complex was getting a massive addition, a massive Kamui training facility which would be the home-away-from-home for all her friends. Practice arenas, special feeding apparatuses so they could constantly absorb life-fibers, comfortable quarters – at any time at least half of them had to be there, waiting for an emergency to happen. Most importantly, a launch platform for a kind of special high-velocity plane that Ryuko immediately forgot the name of was ready, so at any moment they could board and reach any part of Japan in an hour or less.

So what was the conventional military to do? The generals were concerned – rightly, that they might be out of work. But Satsuki had a plan for that. Ordinary soldiers couldn’t handle any serious REVOCS attack, but they could keep watch for them and keep the peace. So soldiers would be spread thinly through every major city, town, and industrial area. Meanwhile, the spymasters were tasked with both figuring out what REVOCS was up to and monitoring public opinion, making sure everyone was as happy as reasonably possible.

Meanwhile, the administrative side of government was charged with making sure that none of this affected daily life as far as possible. No emergency shutdowns for anything, be it roads, ports, power plants, hospitals, unless an attack was literally happening, right then and there - this was Satsuki’s “suggestion”. Since there weren’t any real laws yet about what the limits of power were or what exactly was meant to happen in times of emergency (this was apparently proving difficult for the new government to pin down) the Interim Prime Minister was given unlimited authority to do whatever he needed to keep the economy chugging and everyone fed – provided of course that Satsuki or someone else with more vision than him didn’t disagree, but she didn’t need to say that.

And the scientists, well, they were just there to provide a new set of guidelines for how to try and restore some of the country’s devastated environment, as well as to tell the military about some new anti-life-fiber weapons they’d made (mostly improvements on the Nudist Beach models). Really Aikuro could’ve done it all on his own, and some of them wondered why they were there at all, except it did make a point: we’re really important, so let us do our jobs and listen when we tell you things.

All of this took way longer to say than it needed to as far as Ryuko thought, and from it all she learned was that A: The lab was getting a renovation and would be a much nicer place to spend time, B: Yes, there was a plan for what to do about REVOCS, and C: Nobody who didn't need to know was going to find out she had Ragyo's soul stuck inside her like a tumor. That one was very, very comforting to realize. As she watched her friends skirt around the topic of her involvement, why she couldn't fight, Ryuko felt like they were wrapping a warm blanket around her. Except Nonon. Not like they'd ever been the best of friends, but Ryuko couldn't guess why her every glance just conveyed one thought: *Die*.

But there were other things, things that nobody said but that she did eventually notice (and wouldn't Satsuki be proud of her for that). Like how despite ostensibly being just a single squad of special forces her friends of the Kamui Corps really ran the show. When they made suggestions, people listened. When two people were arguing – a general and a bureaucrat, say, about how supply lines for the Hokkaido troops were going to work – they stepped in and settled it, and even if someone got totally screwed they didn't complain.

And they had a plan, too. Sure, some of them like Uzu and Ira weren't really much for this big picture stuff and didn't really contribute much, but the rest of them all marched to same beat. They must have planned how this entire meeting was going to go beforehand, and Ryuko almost felt bad they hadn't included her in their planning session. Almost.

*I guess this is how it goes. You save the world and suddenly everyone just lets you run it. It's kinda funny. They always squabble so much when it's just us, not to mention that Rei and Satsuki – God they must hate each other now –* Ryuko felt a pang of guilt bite her and flinched, making a general think he'd said something she didn't like and furiously backtrack. *But still, when push comes to shove they unite and take control.*

And there was no doubting who was in charge of their plan. This whole meeting was Satsuki's show, everyone there was executing what was ultimately her battle plan. Even if they thought they were coming to present their own ideas, these were things she'd already accounted for, and whether the general council approved of them coincided exactly with whether she approved of them.

Ryuko saw nothing wrong with this, nor did anyone else at that table (at least of those who were aware they were Satsuki's puppets). To Ryuko it only made sense, she like simple solutions and the simplest solution was to let the genius, beloved, incorruptible Satsuki take care of things until the world was back to the way it should be. Of course, it was all extraordinarily corrupt, despotic even, but Ryuko had lived her whole life under the Kiryuin Conglomerate's rule, so having a despot who actually cared about their subjects and was trying to move things in a democratic way was really quite reassuring. Only those old early 2000s generals had any recollection of what living in a democracy was like.

But still it was nice to see her seemingly thrilled to be running her council, running it well. She kept sending these little electrifying glances over Ryuko's way that seemed to say "*Welcome to my world*".



Expect another chapter that picks up right where this one leaves off soon, probably tomorrow.  
Sorry it's a little late.

# What Do We Do Now: Getting the gang back together

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You all know, don’t you?” Ryuko said somberly. Most of the council had left – only the Kamui Corps and Satsuki still shared the room with Ryuko – but nobody looked any more relaxed than when the meeting was in session. It wasn’t hard to tell why.

“We’re here for you, whatever you need,” Ira said gently.

“Yeah, this shit’s real fucked up,” Uzu nodded.

From Tsumugu, “It’s shocking, but at least we know that if she can survive even that, so can you.”

And Aikuro said, “We’re looking into how we can solve this problem for good, just you wait.

Rei and Satsuki just looked at her sadly. She knew full well how they felt.

But Ryuko’s thoughts were going a mile a minute. Yesterday’s developments had put her in an uncharacteristically pensive mood, and now that she’d seen her friends command the war council she was sure she knew what they thought of her.

Friends - really more like family – though they might be, Ryuko was reminded that they were each and every one of them a practical, deservedly prideful, competent person - trained soldier and commander. And she was a liability, no, a colossal fuckup. Sure, she saved the world, but turns out she’d whiffed the equally important part of *keeping* it safe. And now her very existence was keeping Ragyo alive (she could almost hear the mocking laughter). She was a disappointment to them all, and for what? One single reflexive action she didn’t know she’d even made. This, at least, was how Ryuko saw it.

But there was something else... eventually she got it. “Oh, I see. You’re afraid I’ll go ballistic again, like when I woke up from my coma,” She said as casually as she could, leaning back on her chair for further emphasis.

“Ryuko that’s not-,”

“It’s cool, really. I already freaked out last night,” They might never believe her, but there’d been sort of crude rationality to that. She’d been planning to kill Ragyo and Nui and die in the attempt – no more life-fiber monsters, herself included. Simple, practical solution. The rage came afterwards, because it was either that or tears and one of them wouldn’t solve the problem. Things were more complicated now. “So c’mon. Lay it on me.”

There was a moment of silence. Nobody knew what exactly Ryuko was expecting. Even the Kamui couldn’t guess. Then Nonon spoke.

“You fucking *monster*. How do you know she isn’t taking you over already?” They all knew Nonon as vitriolic, scathing, but this was something else. She sounded like she wanted

Ryuko dead. And she did. The only thing stopping her was that she knew Ryuko was still more than capable of overpowering her. Hers was the terrified rage of a cornered animal, even more so because *nobody* was seeing this wolf amongst them for what she truly was.

In her mind's eye it was no longer the girl she'd begrudgingly called a friend these past two years who sat across from her – it was some kind of hideous, maggoty fiend that had stolen her skin. Hell, it might have even been Ragyo sitting there, putting on such a pitch perfect performance while cackling internally. Or it might've been some melding of the two (she pictured a grotesque blobby personality like the mental equivalent to *The Thing*). The real Ryuko might be in there somewhere, silently pleading for help. Saiban was frightened by all those possibilities (he'd always been more than a little frightened of Ryuko), and that only made Nonon more certain. Something inside that girl had made Satsuki into her unwitting puppet.

"Nonon!" Satsuki immediately shouted, horrified. Before anyone had a chance to say anything else, Nonon stalked out.

"See? She gave it to me straight," Ryuko actually felt a little relieved by that. That was how a rational person would react to finding out she was harboring the devil incarnate inside her.

"Ahem," It was Shiro who finally broke the silence. "We have found no evidence that an unprompted takeover – without Ryuko noticing – is ongoing or even possible. That aside, we do have a tour of the new facilities to undertake, and since Nonon helped design them we can do that without her." He stood to go, dispassionate as ever, "I'm sure it will get our minds off of Ryuko's... unfortunate situation."

~~~~~

The tour did actually help with that a bit – there was a lot to see. New quarters (currently unadorned), offices for every one of them with new computers (which Uzu was not allowed to download things on or else they'd be full of viruses in a week), a new mess hall (which could seat way more than the ten of them), and weirdly enough an aboveground area.

"Now that the secret's well and truly out, there are a lot of scientists who wanted in on life-fiber research. So now we've expanded the aboveground research complex with a new xenobiology department," Shiro explained as they led them through steel grey halls lined by labs filled with all kinds of unusual instruments, official looking researchers in lab coats nodding deferentially as they passed. Most of it was still under construction (mostly automated construction run by Izanami – it was actually a wonder either she or Shiro could stay focused with so much distracting work), but Ryuko could tell it was going to have the same bleak aesthetic of Honnoujji. Lots of concrete and metal, lights too bright in some places, too gloomy in others.

She filed away for later that if she was going to be spending much time here something would have to be done about that.

"Now, this one we're really quite proud of," Houka pointed into a lab with a large plexiglass window. Some kind of sinister looking spiky black chair was sitting in the middle, connected to clunky electronic pieces by a mess of wires. "This device makes use of the regenerative abilities that Ryuko and the Kamui have to draw pure electricity from the life-fiber's home dimension. When we get it up and running it could provide a near unlimited source of clean energy, so long as one of us strapped into it. If you spent all your down time sitting on a chair like this, you could power a city."

“Now hold on,” Ira interrupted studiously, “I thought that the life-fibers fed off of human energy in their clothing form, and that their end goal was to harvest the entire human race and transform it into energy. But if they’re capable of providing unlimited energy...”

“Then why would they harvest it from us?” Tsumugu finished, “We’ve asked the same thing. I’d suggest try asking your Kamui, but...”

Almost simultaneously all the Kamui admitted that they had no idea, although it was a good question. *[I didn’t even know what a life-fiber was until you told me]* Tekketsu added to Ira.

*[I’m still not sure what a life-fiber is!]* Uzu’s Seijitsu chirped, almost proud to be so in the dark.

“Well, that one might be on me,” He muttered to her. Ryuko smiled, it was nice to see how such bizarre things had quickly become so normal. She could feel the presence of her little Kamui children all around her. Maybe other things that seemed freakish now could become normal. Maybe things wouldn’t be so bad.

“Still, we don’t really have a good hypothesis,” Shiro went on, “After all, if they really just wanted energy life-fibers could just park themselves around stars and absorb light without ever troubling lifeforms that live on planets.”

“So there must be something else they’re after,” Satsuki murmured thoughtfully. She did have several hypotheses, but she had to admit she didn’t know enough about all this to say for sure. Yet. “Interesting.”

~“*Sorry to interrupt!*”~ A tinny, metallic voice suddenly piped, and everyone looked around to see where it came from. As if to explain a wall panel unfurled and a small screen appeared, portraying the computer generated face of a little anime styled woman – short, blond, just a little plump, with a tiny little snub nose and a face that looked oddly like a female Shiro, just more smiling and upbeat. ~“*There are visitors here to see you all!*”~

“Are there?” Satsuki turned to the little screen, charmed by what she assumed was a rudimentary AI Houka had coded to help out in the lab, “And who may I say I’m speaking to right now, I wonder?”

The little woman pulled a put-out face, ~“*Well it’s me, Izanami!*”~

Now Satsuki, and in fact everyone, looked a little taken aback. She recovered quickly though, “Oh, of course, forgive me. I’ve never seen your new face before.”

Meanwhile, behind her – “You made a device that lets your Kamui talk?” Aikuro shouted, more aghast that he hadn’t been informed. The other Kamui’s eyes all shot up (except Misaki, who already knew about this). That sounded incredible!

~“*You didn’t tell them?*”~ Izanami gasped, pretending to be stunned. She saw everything that happened in this complex, so of course she was aware that this had been their little secret until then.

She just liked to see Shiro squirm, and he did, “Well, see, it came naturally considering she’s already able to use the computer.”

~"I mean, technically I **am** the –"~

"Did you say we had guests, then?" Shiro cut her off, and she giggled telepathically to him [*Oh it's just too easy with you!*]

~"Yup! Here, I'll patch you through!"~

The screen suddenly shifted, and all of a sudden it showed a shot of the main lobby. A lobby that was quickly obscured by a big beaming smile, wide happy eyes, and a chestnut bowl cut. ~"Oh whoaaa hey guys!"~

"Mako!" Ryuko shouted as she cheerily pulled away from the camera to reveal the rest of the Mankanshoku family – Including guts and Mako's two dogs – all standing behind her, "Mataro! Mom! Dad! What're you guys doing here?"

~"Heh, things are finally kicking off and you thought we'd stay away? Don't you know us at all sis?"~ Mataro chuckled. His head was tilted in the general direction of the screen, but he'd still never taken the shingantsu training blindfold off and couldn't see Ryuko or anyone else at all.

~"Yuh huh!"~ Mako nodded, ~"Even if we can't fight, we still wanna help!"~

~"Well, I'm gonna fight,"~ Mataro muttered.

~"Mataro!"~ Sukoyo gasped.

~"Mom, c'mon! You know what I'm about!"~

~"I mean hey, where'd we ever get keeping Mako away from danger?"~ Barazo turned to placate his wife with a philosophical look on his face.

"How'd they even find out we were meeting now?" Aikuro wondered aloud.

Uzu smiled sheepishly, "I... mighta told Mataro about it." Aikuro gave him a look (not as piercing as Nonon would've) and he explained, "He came in for kendo practice today with so many questions what was I supposed to say?"

~"Ryuko look! I brought Buster and Meatball to say hi!"~ Mako shouted, holding one of her hulking German Shepherds (still basically a huge puppy) up to the camera like a baby and laughing as it licked her face.

"Really... those are your dogs' names?" Houka asked Ira with a mocking little smile.

"Yeah dude, even I'll admit you shouldn't let Mako name things," Ryuko added, "But... I might've also told Mako she could come over."

"Well that clears things up," Aikuro concluded, "Send 'em on down, Izanami."

~"Yes sir!"~

~"I think that's the elevator!"~ Sukoyo exclaimed, ~"Quick, Mataro grab the extra pot of dumplings!"~

Satsuki smiled, “And I may also have asked Sukoyo to provide us all with a home cooked meal in the wake of the meeting.”

~~~~~

The Mankanshoku’s were brought down to the Kamui Corps mess hall, and by the time everyone else had gotten there the Mankanshokus (and Ryuko, who’d sprinted ahead) had already laid out a pretty extensive banquet.

Mako and Ryuko were the first to finish, Mako scarfing her portion down so fast she got the hiccups while Ryuko barely touched hers. The others ate with a greed that shocked even the Mankshokus – they were already feeling the extra energy requirements of their Kamui. So with them all still absorbed, Ryuko took Mako on her own little tour of the place.

“And check this out!” Ryuko said as she opened the door to a giant domed room. A walkway around the edge was separated from the concrete floor by a large moat, filled with water but also ringed by humming, glowing machinery. “We’ve got a real arena now. No more re-purposing test rooms! And there’s more.”

She flipped a switch on walkway, and right before their eyes a massive transparent red dome of swirling light emerged in front of them, enshrouding the arena with a shielding bubble

“Whoa! It’s one of those high-velocity barrier whatsits!”

“Yu-huh! With this, we can throw down at maximum power! Watch,” Ryuko cheerily hopped into an access tube that led into the arena, and when she was inside she gave a quick wave and leapt into the air at full force. Having Mako around had instantly improved her mood like a shot of espresso and she felt like doing one of the things she loved most – messing around and flexing her superhuman muscles.

The full force jump was so powerful that Ryuko was sent slamming into the barrier at speeds approaching the sound barrier, a glowing red blur only visible as an afterimage. She bounced right off it at nearly the same speed, but that had been the plan. She kept crashing into the walls like a bee in a jar, and with her uncontrollable ricocheting the whole bubble was filled with red light, at least until she wiped out on the floor.

“Human billiard ball!” She announced, to Mako’s hysterical laughter.

“Ohoho man! That thing’s craaazy!” She hollered as Ryuko dusted herself off. “Y’know it’s funny, using life-fibers for stuff like this used to be, like, proof you were evil. But now it’s just something you do!”

“Well yeah, way I see it they tried to kill us, so now we get to take them for everything they’re worth,” And that wasn’t all bluster. Ryuko knew that everytime she’d made a Kamui she’d encountered a massive resistance, like she was ripping the life-fibers she’d used out of their network. Maybe if you made enough Kamui you could rip the entire network apart?

It was at this point that Izanami chose to announce her presence. In part because it was her job to greet guests, and in part because she wanted to get in on the fun.

~ “Hello Miss Mankanshoku!”~

“AAAAAAH! Who’re you!” Mako leapt clear off the ground as Izanami’s screen appeared from the wall.

“Mako chill out. That’s Izanami, Shiro’s Kamui. They found a way to let her into the complex’s security system.”

“Awesome!” Mako murmured. All of this just convinced her even more that – even though she didn’t *really* want to use a Kamui to fight, there was so much else you could do with them. “Hehe, she even kinda looks like him!”

~”*How do you like our facility?*”~

“Oh it’s great! Reminds me of Honnouji a little bit, but other than that, really really cool!”

~”*Honnouji? How so?*”~

“Well, these big rooms are kind spooky, y’know? Like up in the ceiling where it’s so dark,” She pointed up at the gloom above them. “Wouldn’t it be nice if it was like, sky blue instead?”

~”*I... yeah. Yeah! Maybe it would!*”~ Ryuko suddenly realized that the Izanami and Mako were like peas in a pod. They’d already figured that out themselves.

And so it was that, after a short call to an exasperated Shiro, Ryuko was leading Mako and Izanami around as they renovated the place. Izanami seemed to have practically unlimited power to rip out wall panels and put in new ones, smooth out rough edges, add seats and décor, and before long it actually turned out to be pretty fun. So fun that Ryuko almost forgot all about her current problems.

But meanwhile, two other best friends were having a much less pleasant meeting. Nonon had crept out of her quarters, quietly grabbed some food, tapped Satsuki on the shoulder and whispered:

“Could we talk privately for a moment?”

## Chapter End Notes

The next part is taking a loooooong time, for reasons you might guess from the end of this one. Sorry I'm late on uploads, but if I didn't set myself some kinda deadline I'd be way behind, so being a little late is fine, I guess.

# What Do We Do Now: Sword of Damocles

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*[Are you sure you want to do this?]*

“You know I do!” Nonon hissed emphatically, and Saiban had to admit that he did indeed. She paced back and forth in Satsuki’s new office, feeling the little trickle of her small, indistinct human aura come closer.

*[But still, what if-]*

“If I’m wrong? I know you don’t think I’m wrong.”

*[No I don’t, at least not about them having an affair].*

“So what’s the problem? If I am wrong then we’ll just laugh it off, I’m a master conversationalist don’t worry.”

*[But what if she denies it anyway?]*

“...”

*[Nonon?]*

“Lady Satsuki wouldn’t do that, not to me. And even if she did,” Nonon crossed her arms emphatically, “Even if she did, it doesn’t matter. She still needs my help.”

*[Yes. I want to help her too,]* Saiban concluded. Any struggle that faced Nonon was his to bear too – that was the deal. And he didn’t believe Satsuki would lie to Nonon’s face either, but it *was* possible. And he was supposed to point out possibilities she missed – that was also something they’d worked out.

And right now, her brain was practically a running loop of *Satsuki’s in trouble Satsuki’s in trouble Satsuki’s in trouble!* So she probably was missing quite a lot.

~~~~~

Meanwhile Satsuki had already worked out what Nonon might want to talk about, and was beginning to plan what she would say. Despite how she might act she was not omniscient, far from it, and rather than decide “*Yes, that’s definitely the thing*” she’d run through twenty or so different possibilities.

Most of those were just banal practicalities, important to making sure everything went right but not really too complex. Satsuki didn’t even bother rehearsing her response to those, she could figure that out on the fly. But there were two...

Was this about Ragyo? Nonon clearly thought Ragyo might be more “alive” inside Ryuko than Ryuko claimed. If that were the case, well, Satsuki could never believe Ragyo had any influence over Ryuko’s mind, no! She only had to remember the look on Ryuko’s face when the



news had first been broken (how awful it had been to hurt her so!), just that one look of indescribable terror made it clear that Ryuko was still Ryuko. Satsuki could turn Nonon back around, she knew Ryuko, she trusted Ryuko.

But what if it wasn't that? *Could she have guessed what was going on between Ryuko and I? From just that one phone call?* Oh that had been stupid, how had she let herself be so careless? It was like she'd been someone else that weekend – a version of herself who let cares and caution fall away.

A sinking feeling took hold of Satsuki. The sword of Damocles was spinning above her, the rope coming slowly, slowly loose. If Nonon found out – no, that wasn't what mattered – if she *told* someone, then the blade would fall and that would be it. Permanently discredited, she would be forced from the political sphere for good.

*Would that be so bad? I could disappear somewhere with Ryuko, start a new life. I did what I set out to with this one anyway.*

Oh, who was she kidding? They'd never make it a day before being recognized. And they'd never be safe. And Ryuko could never abandon anyone (to say nothing of whether Satsuki could). And besides, the fight wasn't over yet.

So the sword had to stay hanging, at least for now. But how?

By the time Satsuki got to her office, she had her plan.

~~~~~

"Ah, you're already here. You didn't have to wait for me to take a seat, you know that."

Nonon smiled, "Ah, it's fine. It's your office, after all," She plopped herself down with an air of complete relaxation. Satsuki took her seat the same way she always did when there was business to be done - back straight, fingers slightly curled on the armrests. Eyes fixed right on Nonon. Steely, piercing.

Nonon thought she could see the brittle interior behind them clearly for the first time. Or could she? For Nonon's entire life Satsuki's words were law. She spoke and reality changed to suit her, *Contradiction is Truth*, after all. So if she stared through Nonon with that glare and said, "*Of course not Nonon, don't be absurd*" how was she supposed to argue? Even if she was certain it was a lie, what good would it do?

*[Do what you have to do Nonon, I've got your back.]*

"So how was your weekend? You seem a little more lively," She started casually.

"I should hope so, with all the recent excitement. But yes, it was pleasant. I only wish I could get away more often."

"Just your luck with the timing eh?"

"Indeed."

"And the lake? Probably beautiful this time of year. Used to have a friend with a mansion up there. He'd go fishing, but I... well you know I'd never."

*Oh, this is unexpected.* Satsuki suddenly realized this wasn't just Nonon's lead in. Maybe she'd had something important to talk about -

*Or maybe she just wanted to have a one-on-one chat with her best friend who's been acting too distant lately. If that turns out to be true, that's really very sweet,* Satsuki's face softened gradually with the realization, although she wasn't ready to let her guard down.

"Hmm, don't I," She hum chuckled, "Yes, what was his name... Akechi or something, right?"

"Mhm! Surprised you remember, you never even seemed notice him. Oh who am I kidding, of course you remember," Nonon said with a little giggle, "wonder what happened to him."

"Father was arrested, sentenced for sedition against the new government. Had most of the family fortune and estates confiscated. These days they work over near Osaka, manage a small construction firm cleaning up a little slice of the ruins. I'm told Akechi settled... not too well. But his younger siblings are doing great at public school, so I hear. His sister wants to be a Kamui wearer when she gets older."

Nonon smirked, "Wow, and you just knew all of that right off the top of your head."

"Oh don't feel bad, I know he was never a close friend. But, to answer your question, the lake was beautiful. Didn't go fishing, just looked at it. That's plenty for me," She almost added "*but Ryuko caught a duck.*" But, *No, I won't reveal that Ryuko was there unless she does.*

Which was exactly what Nonon did next, "You brought Ryuko along, right? She, ah, she seems... better too... y'know, Ragyo aside."

Satsuki frowned, *oh here it comes*, "Yes, she did. It's too bad that Shiro finished the report right then," she sighed, "*She was* doing better, now who knows how she'll adjust."

"Mmm," That reminded Nonon of how she'd found Ryuko right after the breakup – lying on the floor, not passed out but just... disconnected from her body. *My god, what if the trauma of the breakup caused a mental breakdown right then, and that was when Ragyo slipped in?* Nonon suppressed a shudder, "Honestly I'm kind of surprised she went at all, I heard she was taking the breakup very poorly."

"You're right to be surprised, actually. I practically had to yell at her to get her to go. She was a mess, and she needed someone to tell her that," Not at all a lie, actually. Not like Nonon would believe it.

"Huh. So what changed then? I mean, something had to," Nonon said leadingly.

Satsuki drew the corners of her lips into a frown, "Nonon where are you going with this?"

"Ah, well, I dunno, I -," Nonon shot up like she'd been shocked, suddenly realizing she'd have to be the one to say it. She took a deep sigh, "Satsuki, you remember when you told me that one time that you used to have an unrequited crush? Way back, when you first showed me Saiban?"

"Yes?"

"It was a crush on Ryuko, wasn't it?"

"... And what makes you think that?"

“Honestly who the hell else?” Nonon answered reflexively, “Eh! Wait! Answer the question.”

Satsuki nodded slightly, “Yes, I suppose there’s no harm in admitting that.”

“Oh, admitting *that*?”

Satsuki sat forward. Nonon could swear she felt a chill pass through the room. “Nonon, what exactly are you implying?”

*Oh well, in for a penny*, Nonon gulped, “I’m won’t demean your intelligence pretending that you need this explained.”

“...This is a very serious accusation,” Satsuki eventually said.

“Satsuki, look, I know this is, uh, awkward. Really uncomfortable, confusing. But I heard how you talked to her over the phone. I know you. Please, stop pretending you can tiptoe around this.”

“... I don’t expect your approval,” there it was. No more room for that forlorn hope that all of this was just paranoia. It was like she was realizing it for the first time all over again.

“Oh my *god* you’re serious! I – ah – Satsuki what the *hell*! Y-you can’t *do* this!”

*[Nonon, calm. We have to come to her as friends!]*

“I’d hoped to keep what Ryuko and I have a secret, but -,”

“No. Stop. I want to hear you say it.”

Satsuki sighed. Seeing the distraught, disgusted look on Nonon’s face hurt, but she had to follow the plan, “Fine. This weekend, Ryuko and I acted on our mutual attraction. Completely unplanned. We... look, do you really want details?”

“There’s *details*?”

“Not much. Mostly we talked about feelings and life and such. But we did kiss, and... touch each other – I guess ‘make out’ you’d call it,” As Satsuki pronounced the words “make out” like she’d never heard them before she watch Nonon’s face, nose scrunched, jaw slack, descend yet further into a state of appalled shock. *I can’t talk about these things! But yet, what else am I to do?* “We, ah, slept together -,”

“You did **WHAT**!”

“No no, I meant we literally shared a bed.”

“Oh, I thought you were saying you had *sex*. Good, so at least there -,”

“-Well, there was one time- Nonon?” For a moment right when the words escape Satsuki’s lips Nonon entered almost a catatonic state, frozen with the overwhelming feeling pounding in her skull. She could see it in her mind’s eye. Ryuko, looming like a vulture of a Satsuki’s prone body, that predatory grin splitting her face.

*“R-ryuko? What’re you doing?”*

“Nonon? Are you alright?”

“Ohmygod. Ohmygod that... that **freak!**” Nonon leapt to her feet, “Satsuki what did she do to you! You tell me what that – that inhuman – that vile, sadistic, sheming – that *whore!*” Nonon sputtered, and Satsuki was seized by a very uncharacteristic bout of panic. Oh no, no this wasn’t to plan at all! She was supposed to shoulder the blame, but instead Nonon – she blamed it all on Ryuko! She called her a -

“Nonon stop! **Please!**” Satsuki’s nails were dug into the armrests, unsure what the hell to do.

*I’m going to kill her! I’m gonna take her fucking immortal guts and turn ‘em inside out and see if she can heal **that!** And then-*

*[Alright, this has gone too far,]* Saiban, fortunately, only felt the spillover of Nonon’s cloud of rage. Oddly, the more incensed she became, the more detached he felt from the whole thing. He didn’t know these people, not really, they’d never matter to him like Nonon did. But what he did know was that Nonon would regret whatever she was about to do. In her current state, if she tried to get him to transform, he wouldn’t be able to control his destructive impulses. And then...

But there was one thing he could do before it was too late. Reaching deep into Nonon’s memories, he scrolled through them like an odd, skipping slideshow. He could tell the *feeling* of a memory almost as soon as he saw through the eyes of a past Nonon. So he grabbed a bunch of peaceful, calm memories: alone time after kindergarten – when she first began to play the piano, watching the sunset over the Osaka ruins with Uzu – the wistful peace of knowing, accepting that they might die at any moment, staying up late talking with Saiban himself – the wonder of seeing everything through fresh eyes. Dragging them from her subconscious they flashed like firecrackers across her mind, momentarily blotting everything out. After the second time, he could feel her heart-rate going down.

*[Are you okay?]*

“I... I am. Thank you Saiban,” She turned to Satsuki, “I’m... sorry about that. That was just a shock.” She sat down, put a hand on her eyes, laughed in the sort of empty, sad way that eventually devolves into a groan. “I just really never thought it would come to this. I thought everything would mostly work out from hereon, but she really tricked us all, huh?”

“Tricked? Nonon, you called Ryuko a – a whore!” Satsuki could barely make herself say the word. She didn’t have Saiban to forcibly calm her, and she could feel herself becoming emotional. She hadn’t anticipated this, and the sheer hatred from Nonon was just – cold despair in her. Why, why did Nonon hate Ryuko so, and so suddenly? “You think she forced herself on me, don’t you? Or that she... coerced me somehow. Well?”

Nonon nodded, “Well she did.”

“No. Absolutely not. You think I’ll come to my senses and realize this has all been a horrible case of emotional manipulation? You think I’m really so weak willed?” Satsuki couldn’t tell if she was more offended for Ryuko or for herself. She made a harsh exasperated noise that was almost a laugh, “Huh! For two years now I’ve been wondering what was wrong with me and you think now that you’ve figured out what we did I’ll just change?”

“So you admit it’s wrong.”

“Of course it’s wrong, it’s completely unnatural, but fighting it was *never* going to work.”

Now Nonon was sure she had her. It hadn’t been easy, but the bandaid was ripped off and it was time to act. “Then let me help you,” She said as gently and sweetly as she could. “Satsuki, this thing is going to destroy you, you know that right. Ryuko isn’t herself anymore, she’s changed... well, the cracks were always there, but I don’t know if Ragyo’s influencing her or she was just always going to turn out this way but-“

“Don’t start with this again please. I’m the one who deserves the blame, but Ryuko-.”

“You don’t have to keep defending her!”

“I’m not. She has done nothing wrong except listen to me.”

“I know you think that, but -.”

“Nonon, are you even listening to me?” Satsuki was beyond exasperated. This was not going according to plan. “Look at me. Nonon!” Nonon’s eyes finally snapped to, “Don’t presume tell me what I think. No, I’ll give you the whole truth. I confessed to Ryuko first. She was attracted to me, sure, but she was comfortable keeping that a secret forever. It was me who couldn’t take it – I all but wrung the confession out of her.”

“As if I’d believe that!”

“Believe what you will,” Satsuki said, “All I can do is tell the truth, you have only yourself to blame for not listening.”

Which is exactly how Satsuki would react if she was telling the truth.

“Wha-you-*no*!”

“Like I said. I don’t expect your acceptance.”

Satsuki had thought a lot about Ryuko’s reaction when she’d first confessed. Not just what a... watershed moment in her life it had been, but how interesting it was to see someone’s entire world turned upside down in a moment. This was worse. Nonon’s world wasn’t turning, it was collapsing.

The look in her red-pink eyes, wide and drawn and *beyond* horrified, crushed Satsuki.

“I... I don’t know you.”

“Nonon wait!”

“**Don’t touch me!**” Nonon screeched desperately, springing up as Satsuki reached a hand across her desk. “**How could you do it! How!**”

“I love her,” Satsuki said in a small voice. She could sense the enormity of what was settling in on Nonon. A small part of her mind said “*The plan is back on track*”. But what did that matter?

There'd been a lingering hope that Nonon would understand, would be happy for her. But that was just a delusion.

Nonon turned to the door, now desperate to get out of the room. Just looking at Satsuki made her shudder, and despite Saiban's best efforts pumping calming memories into her brain wasn't enough. Satsuki was in too many of them, and in each one Nonon saw those deep, dark recesses behind that face she knew so well. A gaping abyss of foreign thoughts, schemes and sinfulness befitting of the Kiryuin name.

"W-when the others find out, they'll," Nonon said breathlessly.

That was Satsuki's moment. Despite every instinct she snapped, "Yes Nonon, what will the others do? Some of them will believe you, others won't. Some will be as affected as you, others won't. It will tear them apart."

"Are you serious? They'll all see that you're *fffucked* in the head!" Nonon was practically sputtering now, crying.

"Will they? And even if they do, will that change that I am still their commanding officer? Your commanding officer?"

"You're crazy. Oh my god you're *crazy*. You think that matters -,"

"I think winning the war matters. More than anything."

"Then you'll end this... thing with Ryuko before it ruins everything!"

"... Maybe I am a bit emotionally damaged. I've wondered myself. I make no promises but of course I will try to be better. For the war effort we must all be strong. I expect you to do the same."

"They have a right to know."

"Well, if that's what you think. If you think spreading disunity and insubordination in *your* team is worth more than the lives of our people, well, maybe I was wrong about your leadership potential. Aikuro has a long record of command in Nudist Beach, maybe he could..."

Something akin to an electric shock passed through Nonon. The feeling drained from her face.

*Strip me of my command? Oh no no no no! She can't really do that, can she?* But worse than realizing what Satsuki was implying (exactly according to plan, painful to both of them though it might be), Nonon couldn't shake the feeling that Satsuki was right. What did the sins of one woman matter compared to the lives of a nation?

*[W-wait, maybe we'd better think about this!]* Saiban enunciated her thoughts more clearly. He was first, the others – they were all Ryuko's Kamui, and so they had the closeness of siblings. He didn't have anything on them if he wasn't the eldest, he'd just be the odd one out.

"You wouldn't!"

"I don't want to. I don't want to do any of this. But in war we have to be practical above all."

"The war's over. This is just a little mop-up."

“If that’s what you think, then I might really start doubting...”

“Eep!” Nonon threw a hand over her mouth. She knew Satsuki could be cruel with her power, but she’d never felt this before. She felt trapped, hemmed in on all sides, “Alright, I get it I get it!”

“I’m sorry, to be doing this, really I am.”

“Then stop fucking your sister.”

“I can do that, but I can’t stop loving her. I tried.”

“Then I don’t care. I don’t know you.”

And with that she was gone, door sealing shut behind her. Satsuki felt hollow, stretched out and old. She had just watched Nonon’s devotion to her collapse into dust. Now all that was left was the crush of a threat, looming over her, the façade of the trust that had flourished between them.

*“I don’t know you.”*

*Oh, what have I done?*

But the sword remained hanging by its final, dwindling thread. She would go on for another day.

*What more will I have to give to keep it there?*

## Chapter End Notes

This one's been tough, it's gone through a rewrite and half and I'm still not especially happy with it.

# Kiryuin Homestead 1

## Chapter Notes

EDIT: Due to a busy week I think the next chapter will have to be out on Monday, even though I wanted it done today. I'm really sorry about that, I hate falling behind schedule.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

October 2066

~~~~~

Ryuko found herself nervous as she walked up the steps of Satsuki's little house on what used to be the Kiryuin Manor's grounds. The address had been helpful, but she's still nearly despaired of ever finding it amidst an endless expanse of gardens and fountains and statuary that stretched greater even than those around Versailles (although Ryuko didn't know that). A person who could run faster than the human eye could see has no real excuse for being late.

The very peacefulness of the place – when she finally found it – seemed to be mocking her. The earthy smell of the forest, the soft orange glow of the dim porchlight, the crickets chirruping in the willows above, it felt like a place of rest. Thin white speckles of light trailed through a towering hedge wall into the darkness, mere traces of the floodlights that illuminated the manor proper. Well, what used to be the manor: nowadays it was a museum and apparently, they kept the lights on even when it was closed for the night. It made Ryuko keenly aware that the whole world passed by right outside, so close and yet completely separate and unaware of her.

She wondered if Satsuki noticed that about this place. Did she like it? Or did she feel like Ryuko did today, that she was spoiling such peace just by being there. She wondered what Satsuki thought about a lot of things – it was what she was nervous about, after all.

~~~~~

But it was hard to stay nervous when, as she shoved the door open into a narrow foyer hallway and debated if she should call out, Satsuki emerged from the kitchen with one of those sweet smiles she would be shocked to see on her own face.

“Hey,” Ryuko sighed as Satsuki wrapped her arms around her gently and she relaxed into them with her full weight.

Satsuki tilted an amused eyebrow, “Hey yourself. That’s all I get?”

“Well no I –“ Ryuko momentarily panicked thinking Satsuki had expected this to be a “moment”.

“Oh, what are you so flustered about, I’m just kidding. It’s good to see you.”



“Yeah, kidding, from you,” Ryuko beamed despite how red her face had gotten, “Gonna take some getting used to.”

“It’s going to take some practice too,” Satsuki said (she’d momentarily panicked thinking she’d actually upset Ryuko). Now that the greeting was taken care of, she tilted Ryuko’s chin up and gave her a quick, chaste kiss. After having it out with Nonon, she knew she wasn’t comfortable doing anything more than that right now.

But it was reassuring to Ryuko too. She was fine with that simple kiss too; in fact, she’d been nervous thinking that Satsuki might expect more. She felt frail and exhausted, emotionally if not physically, and more than anything just wanted to unwind with Satsuki, the closest thing to a kindred spirit she had on Earth.

Ryuko chuckled, “It’s good to see you to. So, what are we gonna do huh? Want to show me around? I love it already, so cozy!” The floor was that weathered, rough kind of hardwood, the siding and wallpaper smelled of dust and some kind of old-fashioned plaster they probably didn’t use anymore, and the lights were dim and yellow and made everything feel enclosed and sleepy. Satsuki walked through this homey place like she was born to it – just the same as the concrete palace of Honnouji – except this time she didn’t have the stiff back, the imperious frown, but instead that subtle relaxation of her features that made her look twice her age, though no less beautiful.

“Actually, I have dinner on right now,” Satsuki turned and strolled casually back to the kitchen, and Ryuko kicked off her shoes and hung her jacket up, “I know you don’t need to eat, but if you’d care to join?”

“Oh, totally! But you didn’t have to wait for me, it’s already so late.”

Satsuki leaned out the doorway and shook her head, “This is when I usually eat.”

“Damn, didn’t know you were such a night owl,” Ryuko followed after her, but as she crossed the into the kitchen (a very narrow space, not that she minded) a rustling behind her caught her attention.

She turned around and, in the den on the other side of the foyer she saw Soroi sitting with a thick novel and a cup of tea. He looked up with a kindly smile and a polite nod.

“Good evening, Miss Ryuko.” Ryuko was suddenly aware she had nothing on but very short athletic shorts and a plain white tank-top. And that Soroi had certainly heard every part of their exchange. She froze.

“Uh... hi... Soroi – er, Mister Soroi. I thought you were retired,” She stammered as carefully as she could. *Way to go, only been here a minute and already we’re busted. Actually no, what the hell Sats why didn’t you tell me he was here?*

Satsuki looked up from the stove and said simply, “It’s fine, Ryuko, he knows.”

“Wait, really? Uh, alright then, nevermind,” Ryuko was relieved and as nonchalant as she could manage, but still went stiff and red when, with an amused twitch on his usually stoic face, Soroi tilted his teacup at her in a little “cheers” motion. Far from the harsh judgement Ryuko had expected, she quickly saw he was just too happy for Satsuki to be overly concerned about the morals of what she was doing.

“I’ll be in the guest bedroom if you need anything,” He said as he stood, correctly guessing that what they really needed was a little privacy. When he was gone Satsuki left the stove and came up behind Ryuko, throwing her arms over her shoulders and looking at her apologetically.

“I should have told you he’d be here.”

“Nah, it’s chill. I’ve got supersenses, I should’ve noticed him there and asked.”

“Hmhmhm,” Satsuki hum-chuckled, “He continues to surprise me. I had no idea he had such talents at spy-work. That he could evade even the great Ryuko Matoi!”

“You’re kidding again, aren’t you?”

“Only partly, actually.”

“Yeah well, not my fault if I was a little distracted,” Ryuko shrugged as Satsuki went back to stirring the pot on the stovetop, “Speaking of distracted, that smells real good. Whatcha got there?”

“Oh, just curried chickpeas over rice,” Satsuki shrugged, almost embarrassed to be offering such light fare, “It’s nothing fancy, but-.”

“-Sats, please, you had me at curry. You need any help or anything?”

“No, it’s nearly done. I’ve set the table already too.”

“Sweet. So I just...”

“You just have a seat and I’ll be right out. You’re my guest, after all.”

~~~~~

Satsuki turned out to be right, in no time at all they were seated across from each other at the narrow little dining room table, steaming plates in front of them. When their eyes met, glinting in the dim light, they both made a smug little laughing noise, thinking *this is so nice*. Satsuki watched apprehensively as Ryuko took her first greedy bite.

“Mmm!” Ryuko exclaimed as she chewed, “It’s *good!*”

Satsuki beamed, “I’m so glad you like it.” Thus appraised, she was now free to eat too, which she did more greedily than she meant to – it had been a long day.

“Have you always known how to cook like this? You should do it more often!”

“No, I only learned recently. I’ve been making my own food since the manor chef, well...”

“REVOCS?”

“What would a chef see in it?” Satsuki said while nodding in confirmation, “I can only wonder. But that’s besides the point. My cooking is pure function, you’re just saying that,” She murmured modestly.

“Nuh-uh! C’mon, don’t sell yourself short. You never do, so it’s weird.”

“Hmhhh. Thank you.”

They ate in relative silence for a moment before Ryuko asked, “Speaking of the chef, is that also why you live in this place and not the gardener?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Was there really only the one guy though?”

Satsuki shook her head, “He was more of a manager. The others didn’t live on-site. They were bussed in from the slums on the edge of the city.”

“Harsh. But yeah, I was gonna say, this place is so huge, no way there was just one guy. I mean, I was looking all over before and I still don’t think I’ve seen it all!”

“You should see it during the day. Families who come to the museum having picnics, kids running everywhere. We built a café on the back veranda of the manor, and a playground where there used to be this enormous statue of Nui.”

“Neat,” Ryuko smiled, telling that Satsuki was very proud of this, “Right over there, huh? Crazy there’s so many people right there. You ever go out and walk around with ‘em?”

“... Not really, no.”

“Oh.” *Wouldn’t you like to, though?* Ryuko thought, and Satsuki could tell she was leaving it unasked.

“I’m usually at work when the museum is open,” She explained.

“Right, right, it’s just funny that you live so close. Do they even know you’re here?”

“Not as far as I know. A good thing too, otherwise the museum would be swamped with reporters and other hangers on. We’d probably have to ramp up security to keep out any would-be assassins too.”

Ryuko sighed, “Right. Nothing’s ever simple when you’re famous.”

“Oh don’t feel too bad,” Satsuki said, turning upbeat. She could feel the pity for her streaming for Ryuko and decided to stop it – mostly because it upset her to see Ryuko upset. *Of course, there’s a lot to be upset about*, she thought before she could stop herself.

*“I don’t know you.”*

“...Hey Sats? ... You alright?” Ryuko asked, snapping Satsuki back into the moment. Ryuko looked alarmed – she’d just seen a darkness pass over Satsuki’s face seemingly from nowhere.

“Ahem. Yes, I’m sorry. I was saying, you shouldn’t feel too bad about it. I’m just glad we were able to turn the building into something useful.”

“Yeah. So what did you end up doing with the Nui statue then? And the others, I bet there were more than one.”

“Well one of the art directors suggested that, with some changes to the hair and details of the face the clothing, we could make the statue into a Greek goddess or something. But no.”

“Heh, she was no goddess, that’s for sure. More like a lil’ demon.”

“Quite. So I just had the workers tear it down and smash it to bits with sledgehammers. They had fun with it.”

“No-ho shit! Gosh, that does sound like fun! You should gone down and helped ‘em out!”

“Hmhm, and wouldn’t that be a sight. Yes, maybe it would’ve been fun, I’ll admit.”

“See? It’s just like I was sayin’ – ah, don’t take this the wrong way – but you do this to yourself,” Ryuko blurted, and Satsuki looked at her leadingly, “You keep yourself from doing anything that might be fun and just bottle it up until you can’t anymore. Should treat yourself better, y’know?”

Satsuki opened her mouth to protest, but Ryuko went on, “And I know, it’s important. But really, you gonna keep doing this for the rest of your life?”

Satsuki shut her mouth. Ryuko had a point, the sort of point she wouldn’t have been able to see on her own. And which nobody but Ryuko would’ve dared voice.

“But then do you not do the same thing?”

“Huh?”

“Have you noticed that when things aren’t going well you stop eating? You hardly need to but, well, clearly you *like* food.”

“No I know that! I mean, I hadn’t eaten for a while after Rei found out unless Mako made me. Food tastes better with someone to eat it with!” She held up her spoon illustratively.

“Well more than that – you stop going out, trying in your classes, texting Mrs. Mankanshoku – every time.”

“Well I – not *every* time, right?”

“Without fail.”

“Huh,” Ryuko shook her head, dumbfounded, “I guess I never really noticed.”

“And I suppose I lost track of how often I do things... for myself,” She was thinking about Itsuki – how that one meeting was the one she really wanted to attend but a million other things got in the way. The whole point of The Weekend had been to get a breath of fresh air for herself and Ryuko. But the moment she was back the demands of governance and her own rut set back in like iron chains

*Back at Honnouji I could set my own schedule. I was beholden to no one.* Satsuki quickly forced that thought down. “Well, that’s what I’m doing now, isn’t it? And you’re eating again,” She said instead.

“Oh, it’s too good to waste!” Ryuko was emphatic, in part because it really was good and in part because *Satsuki cooked dinner for me!* “Look, I don’t wanna bring you down or nothin’, sorry if this isn’t, uh, what you wanted to talk about.”

They were both aware that there were other, far more pressing and far more unpleasant things they out to talk about.

“Oh, not at all. I’m so happy you made me think about this, actually,” She reached out across the table and took Ryuko’s hand (they were done eating by this point). She was so warm – unnaturally warm, of course, but still pleasant even if a normal human would be dying of fever at that temperature. “Who else could tell me I ought to be doing *less*? Who else would? ”

“Geez,” Ryuko’s face went flush. *One can only imagine how warm her cheeks must be right now*, Satsuki thought, “I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again. You are a sap.”

“I’ll try not to be embarrassed.”

Ryuko chuckled, “So, we’ve established you’re gonna work yourself to death, and I’m gonna mope around for all eternity. We really are a hot mess.”

“We’ll do better, that’s the idea. And uh, I’m sorry, ‘hot mess’?”

“Oh, you don’t know that one? It’s like, when someone looks good from outside, but really they’re just barely keeping it together and if you poke ‘em too hard it shows. It’s not like a serious thing, just a joke people say.”

“I see. Yes, I suppose that is apt – to an extent. We have our flaws, but who doesn’t, and -,” For the second time that evening Satsuki’s thoughts interrupted her

*“When someone looks good from the outside, but really they’re just barely keeping it together”*

*“I don’t know you.”*

That look of something unspeakably horrible passed over Satsuki’s face again. Ryuko tightened her grip on Satsuki’s hand, “Sats! What’s wrong?”

“... Something I should’ve already told you. Nonon. She knows.”

“Oh shit,” *Was it Rei? No, Satsuki clearly thinks this was her fault*, “She figured it out from just that one phone call?”

Satsuki nodded, “She’s perceptive, even you can give her that. Frankly I’m just... disappointed in myself for not being careful enough.”

“Not tryna kick you when you’re down, but I’m kinda surprised too. I thought you’d be better at keeping the secret than me. What, are you just getting worn out on keeping secrets?”

“I may be,” Satsuki murmured, far away from the conversation. She cleared her throat, “But you don’t have to worry, she won’t tell anyone.”

“No kidding. How’d you work that one out?”

“I, ah, I threatened to remove her from command of the Kamui Corps.”

That shocked Ryuko, and it showed. “Damn, that’s cold!” She exclaimed, then gasped, “Oh fuck, she wasn’t happy about it, was she?”

Satsuki shook her head vigorously, and that look passed over her face. Her eyes went wide and far-away, edges of her mouth pulled back, as she reviewed how this was all going to play out. She would keep slipping up, and every time she would lose someone. Was it worth it? All for the pretty face across the table from her – oh who was she even kidding – the only person who really understood her. Of course it was worth it. But...

“Whoa! Hey, hey, Sat’s it’s alright!” Ryuko was standing, rushing around the table pulling back the table and scooping Satsuki’s stiff back into a full body hug, “It’s gonna be okay, you hear? Nonon will come around, she’ll be happy for you.”

Satsuki leaned into her. Oh, how she wished she could believe that.

“She said she... didn’t know me.”

Ryuko frowned, “Okay, that’s pretty harsh, but-,”

Eyes wide as the full enormity of what had happened settled in on her, Satsuki’s mouth pulled into the ugly beginnings of a sob. But even in a fit of emotion she was still in complete control of her body, and she fought it down ferociously, instead looking Ryuko in the eyes with a grave, sublimely empty expression. “I lost my best friend today,” She finally said.

Ryuko didn’t know what to say. Grasping for something, she blurted, “I’m so sorry!”

“For what? You didn’t do anything. I am slipping, you were right. This was my failure.”

“No! I shouldn’ta talked while you were on the phone, that was *stupid*. A-and besides it was me who kissed you the first time. You wouldn’ta done anythin’,” Ryuko was pretty sure that wasn’t true, but it was too late to go back and check.

“That’s not true. And even if it were, it’s no excuse. I was *weak*, and now I’ve paid for it.”

Satsuki was looking away from Ryuko in self disgust now. If she had the strength, she would have torn herself away from the embrace, but she just couldn’t make any part of her move. And she hated herself for it.

“You’re doing it again! Look, you can’t keep putting everything on you, you just make it worse! I’m in this with you too, and if you don’t accept that you’ll – you’ll,” Ryuko struggled with the words, she didn’t really know what she meant to say. Ragyo, Nonon, Rei – it was all so fucked up, but what scared her most was how happy and content Satsuki had seemed, even while losing her best friend tore her up inside.

“Just shut up and hold me,” Satsuki said. And to her credit, Ryuko listened.

~~~~~

Ryuko kept quiet, and kept a fierce grip on Satsuki, for the course of an entire movie (watched on Ryuko's laptop since Satsuki didn't have a TV). She wanted to ask, but she also didn't want to hurt Satsuki anymore. Wasn't she here to relieve the stresses of Satsuki's life, not make them worse? She hoped she was doing a good job, and through the whole movie (a historical docu-flick she correctly guessed Satsuki would like) she replayed the hot-water-bottle trick from The Weekend. Although she didn't keep *completely* still.

"Hmm. That tickles," Satsuki finally said as the credits were rolling, and Ryuko was running a hand through her hair admiringly, "Extra pretty today?"

"So silky," Ryuko murmured, nestling in closer so she was practically lying on Satsuki's lap, "How the hell d'ya do it?"

"An extra half hour before and after work every day and yours could be the same," Satsuki fluffed Ryuko's unkempt mess, "But I like it the way it is. Anyway, enjoy it while you can."

"Huh?"

"It'll all go white by the time I'm thirty."

"You're kidding!"

"It happens to all of us – the Kiryuin white. Well, except you, just another benefit of eternal youth," Satsuki marveled at how she could say those words so easily, while right there in front of her was a person who would never die or even change. Who might go on holding her as dear in her glowing, fibrous heart as she did at that very moment until the end of time. Amazing and crushingly lonely though that thought might be, she carried on explaining in her usual way, "It's an inbreeding thing, see? Here," She held a strand for Ryuko to examine. "You can see the white threads already if you look close enough," She said glumly.

Ryuko did examine it, and yeah she could see the threads, but most people had a little grey on close examination so she assumed it was nothing unusual. *Oh my god, then she really will look just like... her.*

"You're still thinking about Nonon, aren't you?" She said instead, sitting up and closing the media player tab on her laptop. Satsuki nodded. "You weren't ever gonna tell me, were you? Be honest."

Satsuki sighed and said, "No, at least not for a while."

"W-why though? It would've just made it even harder to deal with."

"Oh, you have much worse problems to deal with."

"I mean, uh," *Ragyo, right. And I was afraid she'd try to – well, I suppose 'break up' with me because of it –instead I almost forgot!* "Well maybe, but that doesn't mean I can't still be here for you."

“I’m honestly surprised how well you’re taking it. You were, well, reasonably upset about it last I checked.”

“Heh. Reasonably.”

“I’m scared too Ryuko.”

“I know, I know. I’m plenty scared, don’t mind admitting that. But I spent some time with Mako today, and y’know what she did? She never mentioned it, once. And I thought to myself ‘I’m not being influenced by her. Ragyo would’ve hated Mako most of all, but nothin’ changed between us’. She’s still my favorite, so I can’t be losing myself – so if she’s in there then that’s just where she’ll stay ‘til the boys can figure out how to get her out,” Ryuko said with a toothy smile. “Uh, favorite ‘sides you, obviously,” She added with an even bigger smile.

“Hmm. Do you still love her?”

“Whaat? Nah, you’ve got nothin’ to worry about there. Me and her, it’s different. So like yeah I love her but not *love* her love her. Me and her, we’re like a team, but it’s not like I’ve ever felt this ‘my god I just have to be with her’ feeling - y’know, like with you,” Satsuki’s eyes narrowed skeptically, and Ryuko shrugged, “She’s just always there, same as ever, no matter how long we’re apart. She’s honestly more my sister than you’ve even been ‘terms of how I feel. Does that make sense? Don’t sweat it, really.”

“Yes, I think I understand – when I first learned about your relationship – back when you were in high school, you remember that deal you had – I was just confounded by it. But I think I understand it now. Tell me, do you think she would approve of us, were she to find out?”

“Pssh, more like she’d be thrilled. She’s basically seen this coming for years.”

Satsuki’s face was the picture of stunned disbelief, “You’re kidding.”

“Nope, she caught onto me like, right away.”

“Well she’s... amazing at keeping secrets, I must admit to underestimating her.”

“People always do!”

Satsuki sighed, “I’d thought – no, hoped that Nonon would be my Mako. But I guess that’s not too likely.”

Ryuko paused, looking at her with a serious but upbeat glint in her eyes, “It might not be too late, you know.”

“Explain,” Satsuki said skeptically.

“Lemme see your phone.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Wha- I, alright fair just let me help you text something then.”

Satsuki considered, decided. “...Alright.”



~~~~~

Little did Satsuki know that Nonon was at that very moment hunched over her soundboard, furiously hammering out one track after another. Whoever first said “write what you know” had no idea how well that applied to music too; she wrote and recorded horrid, screeching dissonance which defied every tradition of chord progression – every measure felt like a betrayal, every melody distorted and alien. In later years, this would be considered some of the finest art of her early career, both incomprehensibly Avant Garde and weirdly listenable in a unique way. Small consolation to the musicians in the recording booth who had to bear the brunt of screeching demands. One of her lead singers fled in tears after a particularly scathing takedown, but that had kept the rest in line. Their whole musical careers had lead up to being in the booth with the great Lady Jakuzure, and they would swallow just about any abuse.

Not like any of them knew *why* she was so incensed, but some of the cleverer musicians could detect there was more to it than her usual short fuse.

“No! No no no! Are you listening – Are you hearing yourselves?!” She was hollering when her phone buzzed. She read the tagline, betraying no outward surprise at seeing Satsuki’s name. “From the top, don’t dick it up this time!”

*\*I hope you haven’t blocked my number. Please let me know if you see this\**

“Uh, Lady Jakuzure?”

**“What.”**

*[You didn’t put on the updated version of the beat]* Saiban said helpfully, and when she barely acknowledge it he sighed and picked up her hand himself, pressing the right buttons on the keyboard with a stiff motion.

*\*I have to apologize. None of what happened today is your fault, and I don’t blame you for how you reacted. You stuck by your morals. I’m proud of that.\**

“Lying hypocrite!” Nonon hissed, and was about to type a scathing rebuke, but Satsuki wasn’t done typing (Ryuko was busily nodding and saying “Yeah, that’s good. Just type how you really feel.”)

*\*I’m not going to strip your rank. Act as you see fit. It was monstrous of me to even suggest it.\**

*\*It broke my heart to see you leave. Like part of me had died.\**

*\*Please don’t hate me.\**

Back in Satsuki’s den, Ryuko put her hands behind her head and said, “That’s the best we can do. And I guess now you know you text everyone in full sentences, kinda funny.”

“Shh! She’s typing,” Satsuki waved a hand in her direction.

*\*I meant what I said\** the text was simple. Satsuki’s heart sunk plummeted like an anchor.

But Nonon wasn’t done, *\*I don’t know you. You hid something really horrible from me\**

*\*And I don't know what else you might be hiding. You're not who I thought you were.\**

*\*I guess I haven't decided if I hate you or not.\**

“Read that,” Satsuki shoved the phone to Ryuko urgently.

“That’s good!” Ryuko grinned, “I mean, not perfect, but not hating you maybe is better than definitely hating you.”

“I’m not so sure, myself, but there’s one last thing I can try.”

*\*Attached file: KJpart1.midi\** Satsuki sent that to Nonon. She’d hoped to work on it a little more, and to give it off under better circumstances, but she knew that if nothing else it would get Nonon’s attention.

*\*Well, if you decide you don't hate me, I'd like you to take a look at this.\**

Nonon’s eyebrows flew up. A sheet music file? How unexpected – was it some kind of trick?

*\*What is this?\**

*\*It's something I've been working on. If you're interested, I'd like you to make it into a real song.\**

Nonon was more interested than she wanted to be. She opened the file, started reading (yes, of course she had a sheet music app on her phone). It was primitive, riddled with flaws – to be expected – but this melody... why was it so familiar? She’d never heard it before, but somehow... Saiban had?

*[This is just bizarre. How could she know about this – oh, of course. Junketsu.]* In a flash, Nonon understood. She paused the beat and the band stumbled to a halt.

“New plan,” She barked, “You all get out. Go home. Bright and early tomorrow.”

It was with more than a little relief that the musicians hurried fled the studio. Meanwhile, Ryuko looked at the text conversation in confusion. “Uh, what the hell?”

“I’ll explain that eventually, if she actually uses it. It’s... a bit much to get into right now.”

Nonon didn’t text back. But she didn’t go to sleep until very, very late that night either.

~~~~~

Later, Satsuki lead Ryuko upstairs to the diminutive master bedroom. Satsuki insisted on cramming a queen sized bed in there (she could get away with some creature comforts, couldn’t she?), so they were able to nestle together at just the right snugness.

But the moment she entered, Ryuko’s eyes were drawn to a painted portrait hanging over the bed. A young man in an old fashioned suit with a huge, bright orange coif and piercing blue eyes who stood in a lavish office, hand resting on a giant globe.

“Hey, who is that?” Ryuko finally asked as they were laying there, not yet asleep and not really trying to fall asleep either.

Satsuki looked at her, confused and a little sad, “That’s father.”

“What? T-that’s what he looked like when he was young?”

“Before his facial reconstruction surgery, yes. You see why he went right under our noses the whole time.”

“Oh my gosh, he was *handsome*. Gosh, he really does look *so* much like you!” Ryuko said, but she thought something else. She knew he had to change his face for the sake of his mission, to ruin that perfect Kiryuin symmetry to save the world was a small price, but...

*He did that for me.*

“Well no wonder you think him handsome.”

“He looks sad.”

“He always looked sad. Well, ever since we ‘lost’ you, anyway.”

“Oh my god...” Ryuko suddenly had a whole new, clearly vision of the past. And what she saw was indeed profoundly sad. “Hold on, where did he send me, anyway? Because when he left you you were four or so, and we’re only a year apart, so...”

“I believe it was Kinue, Tsumugu’s sister. Details are scarce, but you could ask him, I suppose.”

“No fuckin’ shit. What a fuckin’ trip this is,” At this point she actually got up to take a look at him. *Dad and Kinue, man the questions I could ask them.* So instead she asked Satsuki, “Were she and dad like... a thing? Didn’t I hear something like that from Aikuro once?”

“Again, I’m not really sure. But I think so. She stuck with him through thick and thin, when even Aikuro considered quitting. It would make sense.”

“I barely even remember her. I feel stupid, y’know? I don’t even know what to say.”

“Well, what can you say?” Satsuki asked, legitimately curious if Ryuko thought there were specific words befitting the moment, “What do you want to say?”

“I dunno. I just wish I knew them. I wish it didn’t turn out this way,” She laid back down. “But if it didn’t,” She laid a gentle kiss on Satsuki’s lips, then another, longer and more passionate, “If it didn’t, we might not be here right now.”

“You know, I can’t help but agree. I’ve tried, but I can’t,” She had to chuckle as she said it too. Then Ryuko kissed her again, and although neither of them pushed it much further than that they didn’t speak for a good long while. And when they did – pajamas and nightgown now partially shed and tangled up with each other, it really was while they were trying to fall asleep.

“Hey Sats?” Ryuko’s arms were wrapped around Satsuki’s belly and she squeezed her a little harder to get her attention.

“Mmm?”

“You said, before, that Shiro wouldn’t call it Ragyo’s soul, he had some other more sciencey definition. Right?”

“Yes, I remember that. What about it?”

“Well nothin’, I just... didn’t know you believed in stuff like that. I kinda didn’t expect you were religious.”

“Hmm,” Satsuki murmured. Her eyes were open now, looking into Ryuko’s. Just like her to bring up something so serious right before bed – so unexpected, “Religious? I wouldn’t go that far. But you and I both know that life-fibers work on a level that’s more than physical, right? We both know there’s really such thing as right and wrong in the world – good and evil. What else would you call it?”

“That’s fair, I think. I guess I just thought you were so logical you wouldn’t accept something like that. But you’re not a robot, don’t worry I know.”

“Oh it’s perfectly logical – extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence – and I’ve seen *extraordinary* evidence. Tell me, because I really am curious, what do you believe in Ryuko?”

“Heh, with everything I’ve seen, I don’t know what the hell to believe. I kinda thought when people started thinkin’ I was a goddess of an angel or whatever that I’d be struck down for stealin’ the big man’s thunder, but it hasn’t happened yet. I know I ain’t anything special, that’s all I can say.”

“... Well, odds are we’ll never really know. At least, not until we see what’s waiting for us on the other side. Which... you won’t be doing. But who knows what you might see a million, a billion years from now?”

“Well, that took a dark turn.”

“What did you expect?”

“... Eh, good point,” Ryuko pulled her closer until their noses were touching, “Don’t you dare go anywhere too soon, though.”

Satsuki smiled, eyes glassy as she contemplated that just two years ago she’d thought that, in a world without Ragyo she had no reason to live. This was reason enough.

“I’ll tell you one thing I do believe though,” She turned up to the ceiling as though she could see through to the stars above, “If there is a god, it hates us,” Ryuko looked at her, clearly gripped by such a thing, “This universe is full of uncounted planet destroyed by the life-fibers. Planets full of civilized creatures just like us, gone forever. What god would let them get away with that except one who *wants* us to die?”

Ryuko chuckled in spite of herself, “Dark. You sound like Shiro, you know that?”

“Maybe. Sometimes he’s got a point. But you know what? No matter what you say, you are special, Ryuko. Because we aren’t dead. You fought God, and you won.”

“Sap,” Ryuko chuckled, “That might be the nerdiest, sappiest thing I’ve ever heard someone say!”

“What’s sappy about that?”

“Ohh you know, c’mon,” She ruffled Satsuki’s hair playfully. But there was an idea that went unvoiced, because it was only a suspicion at this point. *But just like life-fibers were what nearly killed us, they’re also the only reason we’re all alive. Hell, they evolved us from stupid apes too! So maybe Satsuki’s wrong, maybe the universe doesn’t just want us dead. Ragyo might be stuck in me, but if I stay safe, maybe she can’t do anything. Maybe that’s a good thing, it didn’t feel like one, but she could dream. Maybe I was meant to win.*

*Maybe I’m the start of something new.*

## Chapter End Notes

Chapters in this section will be punctuated by occasional "Kiryuin Homestead" chapters that focus specifically on Ryuko and Satsuki's relationship. This one's a little angsty and very dialogue heavy but that's where they are emotionally right now. Later ones will have all kinds of tones. This way other chapters can focus on other characters too, although of course they'll still be pretty focal to the story in all of them.

Oh and sorry this is late, took me a while like the last one. They had so much to talk about and I still didn’t get to the really important question of what will happen with Ryuko and Rei’s relationship. Do not fear though Rei is far from being “dropped”, it’s just gonna take a little longer than this to complete her arc

# The Road to War

November 2066

~~~~~

Nobody knew what the shape of the new war with REVOCS would be once the chaos of the first few days died down, but not in even Satsuki's predictions did she anticipate that it would be... almost boring. Sure, the terrorist attacks with Ultima Uniforms and hybrid beasts that the ordinary military could only stall were just about nonstop, and work at the Research Complex was stopped almost hourly by one of the high-velocity dropships ferrying someone off to fall from the sky on top of the invaders and put them down, and it was exciting to see the terror in the cultist's eyes and thrilling to hear the cheers of crowds hailing them as real-life superheroes and deeply, deeply satisfying to the Kamui's base instincts to hunt and kill... at first.

At first, because there was at no time any attack that posed a significant challenge or even required more than one of the Kamui Corps to show up (and this was especially irritating to Nonon because she had planned all sorts of team training exercises which were now turning out roughly useless). They'd expected the Kamui to show their possessed faces again or hell even some Three-Star uniforms that might pose a reasonable challenge, but so far the most fearsome thing they saw was the Two-Star *Huskarl* model that Nonon had already figured out how to defeat. There were a couple other Two-Star types too (a flying one, an artillery one that fired beams of sound and light like Nonon's Goku Uniform used to, and a big bruiser that enhanced strength but didn't have any other tricks) but these were quite frankly less of a nuisance than the *Huskarls* with their damn shields which meant you had to at least slow down.

And the thing was they *knew* REVOCS had tougher foes. They'd fought them, and barely survived. So why were they being kept in reserve? The tactical calculus said (at least in Satsuki's opinion, and nobody had any better ideas) that swift and decisive destruction of the new government of Japan was not, despite their recruitment propaganda, the true aim. They were up to something, but what?

And so over the first two weeks, as Satsuki's spies fanned out across the world in a high-stakes game of hide-and-seek, her inner circle settled into a routine between their attacks that gave everyone time to do whatever their usual lives entailed between sparring with each other and going out on missions. Some handled this better than others – they'd all expected something different, and when things became exciting again it was almost a relief.

~~~~~

"I mean it's a nice win, but I don't get why they aren't throwing anything tougher at us," Uzu said as he thoughtfully twiddled a broken medal ripped from an ultima uniform. Another day, another war council, another REVOCS terror attack that was mopped up without a challenge. "That's the... ninth, I think, this week without a single civilian casualty. It's great for our polls, I get that. But hell, I think a squad of DTRs could've done the same. So what's going on?"

Aikuro nodded, sitting up in his seat across the table, "I think your initial prediction has been proven out, Satsuki. They're just keeping us busy."

“Oh, undoubtedly,” Houka said, fingers busy on his laptop, “And now you’ll be happy to know we have proof. Shall I?” He asked Satsuki – this had all already passed by her desk, but it was being kept from leaking to the public.

“Certainly,” She cleared her throat, “Although I must ask, councilors, that you refrain from discussing this content outside of this room until after the press release this afternoon.” *Not that it’ll do much good*, she glanced over to the spymaster who had helped Houka collect this information (official Information Chair or not, nobody sifted through surveillance footage like Houka and even spymasters had to defer) and the drawn look on his face told her that no matter what they tried there was no stopping information from beyond Japan from entering through the docks and airports of the nation. There was a seeping feeling out there that *something* was going down, and the best they could do was merely stop a full panic.

“Izanami?” Houka asked the air, and instantly the screens in the center of the room flared to life.

Satellite and drone imagery, photos and video from agents on the ground flashed by. Illuminated by harsh spotlights and alien bioluminescence, armed columns of REVOCS troopers in ultima uniforms marched through the streets of Hong Kong, Seoul, New Jakarta, Sydney (the smoldering remains of the famous opera house were illuminated by the far larger fire of a slowly sinking battleship behind it). And above the massed soldiers and the gigantic, chained hybrid beasts that hunched in their midst and the shells of devastated tanks and mechs and helicopters hovered those unmistakable figures, mere dots compared to the chaos and the swirling lights beneath them, but the unearthly terror they exuded dwarfed the armies beneath them.

The councilors gasped and went silent.

*If Ryuko were here, she’d blurt something thoughtless to break the tension*, Satsuki thought wistfully, but since that first meeting she had decided coming to council meetings was a bad idea. Things were strained enough between Satsuki and Nonon, who spent the meetings as alertly attentive as ever but never looked Satsuki’s way or even acknowledged her unless she absolutely had to. Satsuki never tried to breach the divide, no sense causing a scene during a council meeting, and while everyone could sense the coldness between them only Houka and Uzu knew Nonon deeply enough to know that this wasn’t just because they were both too preoccupied with work. But the feeling spread to the others through their Kamui. Just like out in the wider nation, everyone who mattered in the council knew that something was up, but they didn’t know *what*.

Once everyone had caught their breath a little, Houka explained, “This was last night, at roughly 0100. Lightning attacks on the four largest Pacific states, and smaller landing forces elsewhere,” He flicked through more images, “Siberia, Alaska, Hawaii, and we’ve spotted a fleet still on its way towards the South American coast. The conventional militaries... they never stood a chance.”

The next slide came up. This time even Satsuki could feel the blood drain from her face.

It was a field of carnage the scale of which even the satellite images failed to fully capture. Twisted bodies and cratered, overturned earth.

“Early this morning, the Chinese military assembled in full force to stop the invasion force as it crossed from Hong Kong to the mainland. Their quick response time was impressive, but nevertheless,” another satellite shot flashed by, showing a massive canyon, a perfect cylinder of carved earth, turned to black glass by a blast of immeasurable heat, “Even before Kamui Ranketsu did *that* it was all over. Within hours the People’s Republic of China announced its full capitulation

and has since ceased to exist, annexed by REVOCS. Korea has fallen too, but Indonesia and Australia have retreated and are waging guerilla resistance. I'm told that the American Empire hasn't even offered any resistance to landings in California, as repeated droughts have rendered the area completely uninhabited."

"To their credit, the more remote provinces are refusing to comply. REVOCS has small numbers of soldiers, they cannot enforce their will everywhere," Satsuki added, "But this is beside the point."

"Quite. Once footholds had been established, the REVOCS soldiers fanned out along the coast, rounding up locals and pressing them into service. And then, they started building," The screen changed again, and this final flash showed maybe the most arresting sight of all. Huge rectangular structures, indistinct beneath scaffolding but clearly rigid, industrial monstrosities that towered over their surroundings, even the ones built right in between skyscrapers.

"What the hell?" Ira murmured wonderingly "The sheer cost..."

"...The amount of civilian casualties..." Said one of the scientists, a young woman from Bangladesh who Aikuro was seeing off and on. *Indonesia's not far from home, globally speaking*, she thought worriedly.

"Do we have any idea what purpose they serve?"

"Not really. At first, we thought some kind of massive cannon, or a huge life-fiber resonance chamber that could be used in some form of ritual. But look at these," The screens zoomed in on a set of unusual objects, one distributed to each of the construction sites. Truly enormous solid lead cylinders carved by unnatural means – aggregating so much lead in one place would be nearly impossible without a means of synthesizing it not of this Earth. They lay horizontal on the ground now, but end to end the cratered pillars would be far, far taller even than Honnouji's tower. True megastructures. "Now, what are they being used for?"

A scientist said, "Some kind of massive seismic impact?"

"Possibly, but to what aim?" Houka asked, and the scientist shrugged.

"Well, that's what you're going to find out," Satsuki declared. "No matter the aim, we can all agree that these constructions cannot be completed. To this aim we must assemble an expedition, a surgical strike headed by the Kamui Corps," She turned to Nonon, "You will assemble a crew of five Wearers and their Kamui and travel to Indonesia at the head of this force, establish contact with the resistance, destroy these megastructures, scatter REVOCS to the wind, free the enslaved populace and slay the enemy Kamui, returning with its host – dead or alive."

Instantly Nonon was furious. The fucking imperious tone! Maybe she was just looking for something to complain about, but *why Indonesia! Why not the ones in Korea, right on our doorstep?*

But there was something even more important, "Five is too many. Half of my team must remain on call here for national security." The rest, even Rei, who spent all these meetings with a flat expression that Nonon, read as a desperate desire to get the hell out of there, listened quietly for Satsuki's response.

"Very well, four then. My apologies," Satsuki caved, and Nonon was about to protest further, demand to know why she'd chosen Indonesia of all places, when it occurred to her that



Satsuki had probably asked for five Kamui just to give her an excuse to complain about something. *What the hell kind of game is she playing?* Nonon was taken off guard immediately and sat there stewing.

“I’ll assemble a fleet at once, My Lady,” One of the old generals barked deferentially. So many people still called her ‘Lady Satsuki’ that she didn’t bother correcting them anymore.

“That won’t be necessary. This is the new kind of war the Kamui were designed for. Even with your most capable men a full invasion fleet will result only in more lives lost. Assemble only the logistical support and intelligence agents necessary to support Nonon’s chosen team. Any further questions?”

*[According to Seijitsu, Uzu is very excited about going to the tropics. Just thought you’d like to know]* Saiban told her like a whisper in her ear. Great, thanks. How did he know he’d even make the team? He probably thought, with that Neanderthal brain of his, that there’d be enough time for a day on the beach, surfing, snorkeling. Wait until she was sunburnt as pink as her hair, see how fun it would be then! And of course, he would deny it if ever confronted. *[I think you’re getting upset at the wrong person,]* Saiban snapped her out of the distracted reverie, and yeah, he was right.

“Isn’t military action on foreign soil technically a violation of some international code or another?” Nonon suddenly asked as everyone was packing up and getting ready to leave.

Satsuki looked at her with a totally unreadable glance, “The government of Indonesia is a corrupt and enfeebled junta, it hasn’t had a shred of legitimacy since the 2020s. We do not recognize it. And besides, who’s going to enforce such codes against you?”

However Satsuki meant that to come out, Nonon chose to interpret it in the worst way possible.

~~~~~

“So, who will you send?” Satsuki ambushed Nonon as she was leaving the council chamber. Nonon whirled around in the wide empty hallway that lead to the training arena. The hall, once dimly lit concrete was now a soothing shade of yellow cream with blue lights and engraved leaves on the walls, after Mako and Ryuko’s renovations (Ryuko had even drawn up the leaf designs herself, although Izanami was the one to etch them in). Satsuki could almost feel their intent to make this a place where no one could feel fraught or furious. If only it worked.

There were lots of reasons why this was a bad idea, but at this point with Nonon avoiding her so studiously there was no other way to directly talk to her. Still, the look of something approximating terror on her former best friend’s face cut deep. She debated the merits of saying, “*Nevermind, it’s your decision*” and walking off.

But Nonon’s response wasn’t what she expected. “I don’t know yet, does it matter?” She spat venomously, “More like I should be asking you why the hell we’re going to Indo-fucking-nesia when there’s a whole *enemy army* right across the sea who could attack any day!”

So Satsuki explained, “Because Indonesia is an archipelago with powerful natural barriers against troop movement, meaning when you attack a construction site it will take some time for other garrisons to respond. Because despite not officially recognizing their legitimacy we have the best diplomatic relationship with them of any major Pacific nation. Because Australia is directly

adjacent to the country, and seeing that we can respond to REVOCS in their vicinity should prompt them into asking for help, which is good for our long term aims. Because Matoists represent a significant portion of their population, so you can expect very high levels of local support. And finally for the oldest and simplest reason: we need to keep the ocean trade routes through the archipelago open or else lose timely shipments of grain from Africa, without which our people will starve.”

“Are you sure? You sure it’s not because that’s where your cousin is? Yeah, I saw that was her, the red and white one. I bet you wouldn’t have a single problem if she didn’t come back alive, would you?”

Satsuki was genuinely puzzled, “She’s no rival for power, I swept her under the rug and have paid the price for doing so. If anything she is the one I’d most like to bring her back alive, so that I may uncover her reasoning for betraying us – if she even did so willingly.”

Nonon was infuriated. Those all sounded like good reasons, the exact kind of reasons she always trusted Satsuki to have. But no, that couldn’t be right! She was sure it was a deception, that this was all really just brutal power grabbing... but how?

“Does that sufficiently explain my choice of mission?” Satsuki asked gently.

“What is it you want?” Nonon blurted suddenly, leaving Satsuki at a loss.

“I’m... sorry?”

“You said you’re after peace, but I see you out there,” She pointed back towards the council chamber. “It’s the student council all over again! You have everyone under your thumb, and you love it, don’t you? So what’s the endgame, huh?”

And that did give Satsuki genuine pause. Not because Nonon was right, but because she couldn’t think of a satisfactory answer. One that wasn’t contradictory. How could she admit that being in the pilot’s seat in a time of crisis was still thrilling, even though every time Ryuko left in the morning with a kiss to her forehead and a cocky grin she felt sure she’d rather leave it all behind to spend every day with her. She saw what moved other people, simple goals of career and family and comfort that were far from the most horrible things to want, and she had consumed the great works of philosophy along with everything else as a child – consumed, and decided that questions of happiness and the human condition were best left for those who didn’t have a world to save.

But she’d seen those brutal machines, and there was no denying what REVOCS was building. Apocalypse engines. And Satsuki realized with cold finality what it meant that the war was not over.

*Ryuko, I need help! How can it be that after everything, the weight of saving the world still falls on us?*

*How can it be that Nonon has been at my side this entire time, and she still thinks that we have time to be real people while the fate of the planet is on the line. Have I failed to teach her?*

*I’ve spent the last two years thinking that I had time... And Satsuki concluded that she must have done something horribly wrong, because all I did with this time was break a taboo so*

*deep that now I've ruined our friendship so that it's too late to teach her. And I'm not able to do what's necessary. Not like I was.*

“You go, you find out what they're building, what it does, and you destroy it,” She finally said, “Until you do that questions like that are irrelevant, and you won't be satisfied by the answers either.”

Now it was Nonon's turn to be baffled. *What the FUCK does that mean?*

*[Well, I know one thing. You don't understand her, and neither do I. Come on, let's just go.]* Saiban, able to look at Nonon's memories more clearly and dispassionately than she, was deeply curious if there were any clues to be had in all the memories of Satsuki. But he didn't have time to search, not with the turmoil of his partner's emotions clouding him.

Satsuki was about to go, when, “Wait! I worked on that music you sent.”

She turned back around.

“You know what it is, right?” Nonon asked, “I didn't but, Saiban did. That's the music that... that Kamui use to -,”

“Yes. Break your will. You've heard it too?”

Nonon shook her head, “Saiban, er, lost the ability to make it when they changed him,” it was hard to call up the right words to describe it. Nonon was afraid Satsuki would try to leave again, something about her stance looked edgy, and the quiet, succinct way she'd answered seemed to say she didn't want to talk about this. But before she could move Nonon went on, “But you wore that thing for months. It couldn't have been playing -,”

“- The entire time.”

“Holy...” Nonon and Saiban went through a string of logical leaps very quickly.

*There's no way that's true.*

*[I don't think she's lying. Look at her. But how could she withstand it?]* Saiban couldn't read her exact thoughts, but he could feel how skeptical she was.

*I always knew she was strong-willed, but this is something else.*

*[What I mean is that humans can't withstand it]* Saiban clarified, and Nonon already knew just from working on it that this music affected her in some indefinable way. Playing it back for just a few moments made her heart pound, and she felt this strange heat rising in her throat and an... itch in the back of her mind like it was reminding her of something she couldn't quite remember. Someplace empty and peaceful where she was sure she'd been, but couldn't quite remember

*Does Satsuki want to feel that way?*

*[Or maybe she doesn't feel that way.]*

Fear gripped Nonon, as she suddenly realized what Saiban was getting at. Even Ryuko hadn't been able to resist it, but Satsuki, flesh and blood though she might be she was somehow

less human than even her hybrid sister!

“Why did you do this?” Nonon asked, “You shouldn’t have, it’s not natural.”

Satsuki looked at her sadly, “I just wanted to hear it again.”

Or maybe... Nonon remembered all the horrors Satsuki had been subjected to – that she *knew* but had never *confirmed* to have happened. *Or maybe she wasn’t immune to it. Maybe that feeling of peace, fake though it was, was all she had.*

She had no answer, nothing except this ever-deepening feeling that the woman standing before her was an unknowable void. And that scared her.

“I think you should be in therapy,” Nonon said with finality.

“Maybe,” Satsuki nodded. When Nonon didn’t say anything else she asked, “Is that all?”

“N-no. No, y’know what? I also think that someone who should be in therapy shouldn’t be in control of the military.”

“Hmm,” Satsuki smiled, “You say you don’t know me, yet I’ve had men killed for words less insubordinate than that. And you said it anyway. No matter. Perhaps when you return, if you’re willing, you might play that song for me, and we can talk about what I want.”

“Since when did I say I was going?”

“You didn’t. But you will. Because I know you Nonon, and when you emerge victorious – and you will be victorious – it will be under your command. Your victory, and no one else’s.”

~~~~~

And so, in less than a day’s time Nonon found herself staring out over the shapeless grey blue of a stormy sea, flying south into the unknown just as much to fight and win as to get the hell away from Satsuki and Ryuko. And she knew it, she felt like she was running, like she should have stayed and tried to fix them, though she had no idea how.

At least here when she saw something inhuman, the solution was much simpler. Here the solution was to kill them.

# Ring of Fire: Dropzone

November 2066

~~~~~

There was no noticeable change in the ocean's monotonous grey as Indonesia approached. The stealth dropship flew fast and low, and Nonon could see the roll of the whitecaps and the sporadic patches of garbage, and rarely (eerily rarely) she could feel through Saiban the faint auras of living creatures beneath the surf. Troubled though she was, she could feel how positively giddy Saiban was – not very considerate of him, but how upset could she be? If it weren't for those goddamn Kiryuins she'd be giddy too, although more that she was going to war with her Kamui instead of just from seeing the ocean.

The plane climbed up above the clouds with such a tilt that even Nonon – whose entire combat style was based on balance and acrobatics – had trouble keeping upright as she paced the cabin. The climb flung them right through the effective altitude range of radar scanners in mere minutes. There was no chance they'd been spotted.

"We'll be at the drop point in thirty," She said as she walked into the cargo bay where her picked team was waiting. Aikuro, Tsumugu, and Uzu nodded in affirmation, and she was pleased by their serious air. It had been hard to pick them, no doubt, and in the end it had almost been a question of who *didn't* want to go. Houka and Shiro had big plans for their research – now that Izanami's supercomputer component was working out they wanted to make a similar system for Houka's Misaki. Ira wanted to spend more time with Mako now that the supermax was a burnt shell. And Rei, well...

~~~~~ The day before ~~~~~

"Good work out there today. Shame the practice axe broke when it did, or you would've won the last one," Nonon said as she walked into the women's locker room next to the arena. Immediately after the council meeting, she'd rounded everyone up for some sparring. This was standard practice, every member of the Kamui Corps spent at least two hours a day sparring and wouldn't have it any other way – a day that went by without transforming was a day wasted, you could just *feel* that it was true.

The atmosphere was much less casual than usual. Nobody tried any clever tricks, no balancing swords on fingertips or bouncing off the barrier field or pulling off acrobatic combo-moves. Things were serious now, but they were all professionals and without any discussion the focus changed. Now was the time to practice killing as quickly and efficiently as possible.

"Thanks," Rei called over the noise of the blow dryer. Nonon usually wasn't the type to dole out complements, but that wasn't what this was. She just liked talking shop, when talking shop meant Kamui fighting. "Regular steel just doesn't hold up. I really don't believe it's cheaper to have us go through like twenty steel blades a day than to just make some blunt hardened life-fiber ones, but what do I know?"

"No damn way I'm having that argument with Aikuro."

“Wait. Hold on. I just figured it out! They just melt the broken ones down and recycle them, don’t they.”

“Ohhh. Pfft yeah alright that tracks. Still, yours wouldn’t break so often if it wasn’t such a giant-ass battleaxe.”

“Nah, I like it though.”

“I know, I know, but you gotta admit it has its drawbacks. Why’d you pick that, anyway.”

Rei made a thoughtful hum noise and took a moment to confer with Furashada before saying, “It’s fun. That’s about it, really. I used to think it would be... interesting to carry such a big weapon like it was nothing. But Ragyo had no time for such frivolities. Something so clumsy wouldn’t be *beautiful*.”

“Huh,” Nonon concluded as she stepped into the shower. She wasn’t in there long and when she got out Rei was wearing Furashada instead of her towel and was busily adjusting the straps on his sandal components.

“So what d’ya think, you wanna go to war with us?” Nonon finally asked as she wrapped her hair in a towel. Rei looked almost frightened by the suggestion.

“Oh, no that’s alright,” She chuckled lightly, “I actually thought you’d already decided who you were bringing.”

“Eh, not really. I just thought you might want to go, y’know, get away from Ryuko and all that shit,” Nonon said in snide way that told Rei she was rolling her eyes, even though she wasn’t looking at her.

Rei’s eyes narrowed. *Does she know?* Both she and Furashada wondered, and Furashada immediately started combing their memories to see if they’d slipped up at some point. If they were responsible for the secret getting out, well, that’d be bad in a big picture way.

*[Judging by her tone, if she knows, she does not approve.]* Furashada remembered how hateful Nonon had been when they all first found out about Ragyo. *[Tread carefully.]*

*I will,* Rei thought, and she said, “I appreciate the thought, but you shouldn’t be worried about that. Really, it’s fine – someone else would be a better pick to go.”

“... You aren’t – you aren’t back with her, are you?”

“Oh, no no no. I actually just starting renting a new place,” Rei quickly explained, “I mean, I did go over when we all first got the report, you know the one. She was really, really torn up, shouldn’t’ve been alone that night.”

Nonon looked at her skeptically.

“And then I think one or two more times – but that was just to get my things!”

Nonon was still looking at her skeptically.

*[She knows!]*

“Hey, c’mon, stop looking at me like that. What, you really think she *is* Ragyo now? You should’ve seen her that night.”

*[No, no she knows!]* Furashada hissed urgently, and Rei believed him, but there was no way she was approaching it in conversation.

“I-I mean we had some trouble yeah, but she’s not a bad person. I’m just trying to figure things out now,” Rei said, and that was the truth.

She’d had a month to think about it. A month to try to hate Ryuko, to wall off her life and make it function without her. But sure as Furashada wrapped her close and warm it wasn’t possible. How could you hate a person who wasn’t even human, who brought magic into a bleak, mundane world? Who’d brought magic into her world? It sounded so strange, but now that she was one with Furashada... she was half Ryuko’s child.

No, obviously that didn’t make any sense. More like she was a child of the idea Ryuko represented – that humans and life-fibers could live together. And how could you hate someone who was in every way a representation of ideas? Wild and free, eternally youthful, heart forever on her sleeve, and simply, majestically inhuman. Rei had never known her to be anything else. And what she’d done – *what she’d done* (hate Ryuko or not, Rei was still *furios*)– didn’t change that. It just meant she was damaged. Rei knew full well what Ragyo and Nui had done to her when they’d brainwashed her, she wished she could forget.

*If I’d only acted then, maybe she wouldn’t have turned out damaged. Is this my payment for what I’ve done?*

And who wasn’t damaged? Who among them hadn’t been through hell? Even Satsuki was no exception. Rei had tried to hate her too, but how could you do that when she too was less than she could be because of that monster? Oh sure, she was beyond jealous – just look at her walking around with her statue of a body, her will unbroken in spite of it all – who wouldn’t love her? But how much did that matter when she was just as messed up as the rest of them?

*It is like a disease, this Kiryuin curse. It infects all of us who come close to them – who graze that great and terrible thing beyond humanity which they have become . Both mother and daughter.*

But she couldn’t explain all that to Nonon, especially not now, when she didn’t have any answers herself.

So Nonon just blinked and shrugged and decided she had too much to do to argue now. Rei might be nuts for that but it wasn’t like she was at fault. “Alright, sure, whatever. Final pitch then: in terms of raw power you’re the strongest of all of us. Don’t you want to go up against a real threat, see what you can do?”

“Eh, not really. I actually kind of like what we’re doing right now.”

“Come again?”

“I’ll do what’s necessary but if someone has to stay behind and keep guard I’m fine fighting these minor attacks.”

“Wha-but they’re just distractions! Cannon fodder!”

“Honestly I don’t really care about that. I just like being there to rescue people.”

“Oh, well I mean I understand wanting an audience, but don’t you want a challenge?”

“Not as much as I want to help people, I guess,” This wasn’t false, but it was a more charitable explanation than what she really felt, which was that she loved most was to bask in their cheers. And it felt so much more real when you were on the ground with them, rather than at a stuffy ceremonial presentation of medals. “Besides, if I want a challenge, I can always duel Uzu. Seriously, just take him instead, he’s easily the best of all us, and I know he’s really excited about going with you.”

“Oh Jesus, that moron. Why’d he go around talking to y’all about it?”

“I mean, you guys are dating, right? Why wouldn’t he?”

“Well yeah, but – actually forget it. No way I can take him, he’d just fuck something up,” Nonon said lightly, only half joking.

“Ohh you’re too harsh. You know, back before when we were keeping tabs on everyone at Honnouji I was in charge of figuring out how we could *get to* each of you if it ever became necessary. At first with him it was Satsuki but then, right around the time he blinded himself, it switched over to you.”

“Pfft. Yeah right.”

“I’m serious! It was pretty obvious – we missed everything Satsuki was planning but we still managed to get that. I mean, was there ever a time when he purposefully crossed you after that, even once?”

“...Huh...” Nonon said thoughtfully. Come to think of it, she *had* been a little distant since she found out about Ryuko and Satsuki. She couldn’t talk to him without him asking about it. How long was she supposed to keep that up though?

By now Rei was long since done and was about to leave. She turned back to Nonon with a smile, “Of course, if you order me, I’ll go. But I’d just rather not.”

“Then don’t worry about it,” She nodded, internally thanking Rei for that. Rei was almost out the door now, “Hey Rei?”

“Hmm?”

“Ryuko doesn’t deserve you, you know that?”

Rei made a half laughing noise, “I try not to think about what she deserves. Because logically she saved the world, so really, she deserves the world. But we can’t just keep letting these Kiryuins have *everything*, right?” She actually sounded doubtful of the last point.

But Nonon was emphatic, and in that moment they both thought the other knew perfectly that *they* knew what their Kiryuins were up to.

“Right.”





So that was how Rei had turned her down, and how she'd decided that Uzu definitely had to come along. And Aikuro and Tsumugu, well they were natural choices – capable combatants and infiltrators who each spoke multiple languages and had more experience than any of the rest of them could have ever had.

Together they were quite the motley crew, Nonon in Saiban's emerald dress looked more suited to a fancy dinner than a battlefield, Aikuro glowed in Nekketsu's brilliant white suit next to the sleek, militaristic Reiketsu, and then Uzu looked plucked from an earlier era in Seijitsu's embroidered gi. But Nonon thought they all looked like they belonged. Except for –

*The boy...*

He was sitting in the corner on a palette of jamming needle cases, listening attentively but looking gawky and odd-shaped in a bulletproof vest and a helmet that was too big for him. Mataro Man-fucking-Kanshoku. Nonon could barely believe he was there, she didn't want to believe it. But Uzu had insisted, he wanted him to be a "squire" or something, said that if Mataro wasn't allowed he wasn't going either. And Nonon had nearly said "fine" and kicked him off the jetway, but no, she'd already made up her mind that he was coming, and she wasn't going to let him ruin that.

*But this kid, this kid is going to ruin everything,* Nonon fumed, and for once Saiban didn't argue. This was no place for a sixteen-year-old kid.

For his part, Mataro started to regret coming along the moment she walked in and glared at him, nostrils flaring with displeasure. If it were just the two of them, he'd have had something annoying to say to her... he thought, but what?

*It's like they all forgot I survived a month with the just a couple buddies in Honnou-town when the COVERS were roaming it. I think I can handle these creeps, they're only human!* What he had in mind was just mopping up stragglers, not even killing them just stunning them with needles. But no use speaking up though, all four of them were geared for battle and ready to slice something's head off. Besides, considering how long Uzu had been forced to bargain with his mom just to get him to come along – agreeing he wouldn't come within a mile of any real fighting, that he'd sit tight with the comms nerds whenever things got rough – it was pretty clear even he didn't trust the Mataro could be of any help. *This is big boy business now, I guess. Satsuki would say I was lucky to even get to watch. Ryuko would say I should probably "borrow" one of these needle guns just in case.*

"So, what're you gonna do?" Uzu asked Aikuro and Tsumugu.

"I think I'll give *Hayate* a whirl as we head down, try to pick off as many of them as possible," Aikuro said, casual under pressure as ever. With a faint clicking noise his bow, *Hayate*, expanded to full size in his hand, and he twirled it experimentally.

"Good idea," Tsumugu grunted, "I've got a rocket launcher right here, think I'll join in and take out their transport. Ultima Uniforms may be immune to rockets, but APCS sure aren't."

"I think I'll use my cape to parachute down to the other side of where you land, outflank 'em. They won't know what's going on until it's too late!"

These were all okay ideas, but Nonon suddenly realized something much worse than Mataro's presence was going on here.

She'd unintentionally picked the three people most likely to countermand her orders. Uzu, of course he already thought he could pretend that her commands didn't apply to him. And the other two, with their years of experience, obviously they would think they knew better. She felt the blood rising to her face.

"And who gave you permission to do that?"

They all looked at her like she was a buzzkill. No, like they'd momentarily forgotten she was there.

"You can't go around taking potshots from a thousand fuckin' yards, you're gonna blow our cover!"

"Nobody I target will spot us, believe me," Aikuro said in cocky defense.

"Well what about the guy standing next to him? These people aren't stupid, they'll have overlapping lines of sight on their sentries."

Aikuro held up his hands in resignation, "Alright, you're the boss."

"You can pick off a couple right before we land. Same goes for the rockets those are big fireballs coming right at them, they'll definitely see that."

Tsumugu nodded. He at least respected the chain of command.

Uzu, on the other hand, "C'mon, what's the problem? It's not like they can beat us, and they aren't faster than us so they won't get away. Let's have some fun with it!"

*[Yeah! You know what these guys call us? **Godrobes**, emphasis theirs. They know they don't stand a chance.]* Seijitsu chirped to the other Kamui.

*[I don't know,] Saiban responded skeptically, [You weren't there for that huge bird Nonon and I fought, but if they have another of those it will be more challenging than you think. And I can sense the stink of their auras from here.]*

Fortunately, Nonon ended the argument before it got too out of hand. "We're almost over the dropzone. And as for you," She addressed Uzu. Stick with the team, you don't have to go off being a hero on your own."

"You don't think I can take care of myself?"

Nonon sighed, barely audible over the rush of wind as the bay doors opened, "I know you can. But why should you have to? This is what we trained for, let's run this op to plan and show them we mean business. Alright!"

"Yes Captain!" Tsumugu shouted, and without a second thought flung himself out the open door. Aikuro wasn't far behind, and then Uzu, giving a mocking wave to Mataro (who was eating his heart out with sheer jealousy).

"And as for you!" Nonon shouted to Mataro, leaning out the door so her hair whipped everywhere. "You sit right there, don't touch anything until this plane hits the ground!"

"But I -,"

“But nothing! Your ass, right there, no move!”

“I don’t have to fight! Just let me help!” Mataro shouted, but she was gone.

~~~~~

Four tiny dots of orange light peeled out from the clouds, a brief flash that could’ve just been a shaft of sunlight. Once transformed, they faded to mere dots, all but invisible at that range. Nonon had been right, REVOCS wasn’t stupid and they had plenty of sentries. But by the time they were could be spotted they’d already be going too fast.

And though they hurtled down at lightning pace, Nonon had plenty of time to survey the scene. The faded green of the rainforests, the stark blue and white of the sea, the bleached corals. And above it all the construction. It really did look like nothing a human would ever make, even in its unfinished state. A twisting monolith of sheer black metal, a cacophonous mess of spines and gears and other unidentifiable machines that writhed around that central cylinder.

*We’re gonna tear that thing down with our bare hands!* Nonon thought over the sheer rush of power and adrenaline.

As they reached terminal velocity, they picked targets. Nonon pulled Kiba in front of her and streamlined herself into a little pink and green missile. Without any wind resistance she tore ahead of the others, right at a guy who seemed to be observing the construction who she hoped might be a commander of some kind. Too late, she realized he was wearing one of those damn *Huskarl* models.

*I wonder what’ll happen.*

She didn’t have long to wonder. Even travelling at such insane velocity, she couldn’t pierce the energy field, but she could knock the man off the scaffold he was standing on, down to the metal floor of ground level in a chaotic mess of collapsing rebar. And the energy field might’ve been stronger than the floor, but his body wasn’t.

Nonon had never seen anything like it. A horizontal splash of human viscera blasted out from his body, crushed between about six inches of impermeable energy shields. He was squashed utterly flat, a grisly pancake hovering off the ground. As the life-fibers of his *Huskarl* welded themselves to Saiban’s curved shoulderplates, the field collapsed and Nonon and her victim fell to the ground.

“OHOHOHOLY SHIT!” She crowed as the rest of the world returned to her. There was screaming everywhere. The enslaved locals ran for cover – they were dressed in little more than rags and heavily malnourished, so there would be no chance of getting them confused with the soldiers – and the REVOCS troopers whipped their heads around desperately trying to figure out what the hell was happening. One of them drew a bead on her (not that it would do much good), but –

“SEN-I-SOSHITSU!” In a flash he and the two troopers next to them fell, unconscious and with their uniforms burst into life-fibers. She watched them fly off after Uzu as he sprinted nearly too fast for her to see, blinking back and forth and shouting “SEN-I-SOSHITSU” the same way he shouted “MEN-DOU-KOTE!” Each shout was another perfect slice, right along the back of some poor sod, and then with a gasp he would fall, completely unharmed and completely naked. She didn’t think he’d killed a single one.

“Heh, well we can’t all be perfect, eh?” She said apologetically to the bloody chunks she was standing in.

The air hummed with a hailstorm of arrows, regular steel but travelling so fast that a one-star’s defenses were meaningless – every hit was another man who was just... gone, carried off like ragdolls. And then Tsumugu’s rockets hit, and those must’ve been some special kind of super-missile because the ground shook and fiery chunks of APC fell everywhere.

Everything was burning. Nonon was thrilled, and in that moment her feelings and Saiban's were one and the same. *Kill.*

“Oh GOD we’re fucked up!” She shouted in a moment of clarity as she threw herself into the battle.

But it wasn’t much of a battle. It was rout. Not that that mattered much to Nonon just then. She resolved to turn her brain off and do what she’d gone there to do:

Welcome in the age of Kamui warfare.

# Ring of Fire: Setback

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November 2066

~~~~~

Nonon was euphoric. There were no other words for it. Saiban's power flowed through her stronger than ever, like live electric wires crawling up her veins. There had been many life-fibers to take today, and after a feast like that he billowed with a latent potential. And it wasn't like he himself wasn't overjoyed – Nonon had promised that one day he'd see this world, but he had no idea it was filled with such variety! They hummed an improvised melody to the rhythm of Nonon's own overactive heartbeat as they took in their little kingdom.

Around the REVOCS construction there was a large clearing between the bone-white beach sand and the dense tropical forest. The wind drifted through it and carried the noise of seabirds, oblivious to the drama of humans and life-fibers playing out in their midst. Saiban was in raptures at the sight of it all. Nature's beauty may have been faded – garbage was washing up on that pristine beach, and the trees of the forest were too uniform, actually an abandoned, overgrown banana plantation instead of natural growth – but in spite of that to his fresh eyes it was still beautiful. Having that in the back of her head only made everything more wonderful to Nonon, but he knew better than to interrupt her with questions about this new country and its people.

She was much more interested in what was happening within the clearing. Beneath her, on a lower rung of the large platform that surrounded the base of the construction, Aikuro and Tsumugu were working with a crew of intelligence agents. Aikuro leaned over a computer terminal downloading all the blueprints and data logs, and with Nekketsu still powered up (Nonon had told them all that they were not permitted to power down while in the warzone unless sleeping, and nobody had protested *that* order) he looked to Nonon like a big white and purple kite trying to use a computer, since Nekketsu's gigantic collars cut out the rest of his body. He was talking softly to her, explaining for her benefit what he was doing. Meanwhile, Tsumugu had built some sort of magnetic containment device that would safely move all the life-fibers that had been part of the building into safe storage cultures. Apparently, great cords of the stuff were strung all around the giant lead cylinder that was the center of the whole thing, who knew why. Nonon was just looking forward to divvying that up as soon as they made sure nobody back home had a problem with them absorbing it all.

Further out, a great throng of people filled the clearing in three rough groups. The stealth dropship they'd dropped from and the rest of the squadron were parked on the beach, and a bunch of other agents – a mixture of Houka's Information Committee members from Honnouji and former Nudist Beach Spec-ops – were turning them into a base camp. Then, huddled together next to a pyre that they'd been forced to construct for their fallen comrades were the REVOCS soldiers who'd been taken prisoner.

All of them were naked, their Ultima Uniforms stripped from them, and they looked it. People who lived for clothing could not abide being reduced to this. But they hadn't brought enough handcuffs for them all, or enough rope, so instead Nonon had just put Uzu in charge of watching them. With

those curling, gilded shoulderpads and the horns poking from his hair he looked properly devilish, and after a few... illustrated examples he'd made it pretty clear that even though they weren't bound anyone that wanted to try and pull a runner was going to lose a limb. And they weren't about to waste medical supplies patching up the bloody stumps of traitors to humanity.

But Uzu wasn't just there to guard them, no. He was also posted to *protect* them from the third group: the freed locals. To them food and medical supplies had been distributed, but it was never going to be enough with just the ten dropships that had brought the entire strike force compared to the thousands of them. So they just milled about in an agitated state, talking in a language Nonon could only understand snippets of. Judging by the piles of wood and sheet metal laying around this clearing had previously held a village – some of them might've even lived right here. As it was they clearly wanted to avenge themselves on the REVOCS cultists, even with Uzu leaning on his sword between them (*cute – he kind of looks like his teenage self*, Nonon thought) they crowded close. Haggard, angry faces against pale but well-fed muscle and dead eyes. Occasionally someone threw a rock, and when they did Uzu's head would shoot to make direct eye contact with the offender, terrifying them enough that they wouldn't do it again.

Of course, he had no intention of actually doing anything to the poor people. And they knew this, their anger wasn't directed at him and they were actually trying to help the rest of the strike force by telling them everything they knew (which quickly became overwhelming). But this was war, and prisoners had uses. Still, if Satsuki gave the okay Nonon would happily feed those traitors to the deserving hands of the crowd. She almost wanted to just do it and then when Satsuki called tell her "Oops, looks like there weren't any survivors."

Even from on high she could hear them shouting, and though she didn't understand the language she could pick out words. "Ryuko" "Matoi" "Kamui" and a couple of Indonesian words she did recognize like "Queen" "Goddess" and "fuck you". So it wasn't hard to guess the rest.

*They'd be right at home camped out in front of Matoi's penthouse, just give 'em some black robes,* Nonon remembered Satsuki telling her that the Indonesians were very big on Matoiism.

For their part, the cultists responded by chanting a prayer. Nonon would soon wish she'd shut them up, but for now how could she be mad? Everything was going perfectly.

Except...

*The boy.*

"Oh what the fuck is he doing," She muttered to herself, then without even a running start sprang off her balcony down to where Mataro was standing, casual as could be, within arm's length of the life-fiber holding tanks. "Hey twerp! Back the fuck up!" She shouted as she landed.

"What!" Mataro held up his hands defensively. "Was just lookin', geez! You act like I ain't even seen life-fibers before. I went to Honnou-town middle school, you know!"

"Oh well look at you, flaunting your *middle school* diploma!" Nonon shot back snidely. He was *taller* than her now, god dammit! "Shouldn't expect anything better from a *dropout*!"

"Oh yeah right, like any of you can do better. I'm sure you learned a lot in all two classes you went to at Honnouji, real star student you are," Mataro had every intention of being properly deferential to his commanding officer, show them all he could, but that dropout comment pinched a nerve. Which he knew full well she meant to do, like a test – he was failing now, but could you

blame him. The whole feeling of her was like a spiny critter, a porcupine or something. *What does Uzu see in her? Asides having a girlfriend, which is fair enough I suppose.*

Nonon rocked back on her heels and smiled a forced, condescending smile, “You’ve learned shingantsu, right?”

“Uh, yeah. The blindfo-,” Before he finished speaking Nonon threw a sucker punch, not at full power but plenty capable of cracking a rib. If it had hit, that was, because Mataro’s instinct kicked in and he was already moving before she came anywhere close, nimbly scooting out of the way. “The hell!”

“Yeah, see, you’ve got shingantsu. So can’t you, like, feel that this stuff is extremely bad news?”

“I do feel something,” Mataro answered honestly, “It’s faint. Kinda like a big magnet.”

“Yeah, I usually take that general feeling as a ‘stay away’ thing dude,” Uzu called over, of course he’d been listening in. Mataro looked hurt – he didn’t look at Uzu, mind, because with his blindfold there was no point. He could feel the life-fibers pulse, as though they were taking glee in his discomfort.

Nonon took a step closer, too close for him to get out of the way if she tried another punch, and despite his newfound height she loomed over him, “Well, I’m not impressed. So you’ve got shingantsu, so what? Anybody can learn it, it’s not that special. Combine that with training maybe like, I dunno, world master of kendo, and you get somewhere. But you don’t have that, do you?”

“Well no but-,”

“By the way, you will address me properly from now on, dropout,” Nonon sneered. *Ira’s not here to berate me this time!* Nor was Saiban going to play the voice of reason. Mataro’s presence annoyed him too, it was like being aware of a stick in your path while riding a bike and thinking *if I’m not careful I’m going to hit that and go flying head over heels*. Even if you probably won’t hit it (in this case hitting it meant the kid fucking something up or, heaven forbid, dying) it still weighs on the mind.

“No ma’am.”

“No, you don’t,” She hissed venomously. “In fact, you don’t have any training. So while we’re out here in a warzone you’re a liability. A *tourist*. So, do us all a favor and stay out of the way. And don’t touch the *fucking life-fibers you moron*.”

“Yes ma’am,” Mataro nodded, understanding now that he wasn’t going to get through this way. He walked off to the dropships, dejected.

“Don’t you think you were a little too harsh?” Tsumugu asked as Nonon vaulted back up to her spot.

“He doesn’t belong here. We all know that.”

Tsumugu shrugged, “Not saying I disagree with you, but two things.”

Nonon rolled her eyes, “Yeah, go on?”

“One: We all had to learn at one point. Two: A person with shingantsu is still an asset, training or not, and you could find a use for him.”

That last one wasn’t false, Nonon reflected. But she didn’t want to be seen to cave. She shrugged, “Hold that thought.” An attendant had been trying to get her attention for a minute or so now.

“The council is ready for your report,” He said helpfully as he brought her a laptop. Satsuki’s grave frown was already at the ready on the other side of the video call, along with the rest of the council.

~ “Nonon,” ~ Satsuki’s greeting was stiff, ~ “I trust everything has proceeded according to plan.” ~

Nonon nodded, bowed to keep up appearances for the rest of the war council, “It’s done. We will send technical readouts of the object as soon as they are finished downloading.”

~ “Very good. Do you have any preliminary conclusions as to its purpose?” ~

“It’s definitely a weapon. It appears to be designed to use a life-fiber powered device similar to a railgun to accelerate the large lead cylinders we’ve seen to high speed and fire them. It doesn’t seem right though, because,” Nonon couldn’t think of a good way to explain it, but they seemed to be built... backwards. To fire the lead not up, but *down*. What was the use of that? Instead of explaining, she finished, “We still have some questions about the design of the structure. Hopefully Houka and Shiro will have some insight to... er, where are they?” Nonon couldn’t help but notice that the chairs on the side of the war council chamber were all empty.

~ “In the hours between your arrival in Indonesia and now there have been a total of eighteen separate attacks throughout the country. This is their counterattack against us. I’m told Gamagori, Inamuta, Iori, and Hououmaru have each handled several of these attacks already, so the situation appears to be in hand.” ~

Nonon nodded. Yes, a counterattack was probably to be expected. “Is there anything else?”

~ “Yes, please tell us what prisoners and assets you have captured.” ~

“Well, there’s the structure itself, locals say it’s called the ‘hellfire obelisk’, whatever that means. Then there’s the life-fibers themselves, I don’t know the number but it looks like there’s a lot. And then a few hundred prisoners of various ranks.”

~ “Very good. Destroy the obelisk. The life-fibers should be divided evenly amongst the four of you and absorbed. Finally, the prisoners.” ~

“Yes?”

~ “We don’t have any way to ensure they won’t become a threat again,” ~ Satsuki sighed. ~ “Send back half of your dropships with as many as can fit and a suitable security detail. Pick those that look most likely to renounce their beliefs. Young, fresh recruits. The others... they’ll have to be put down. I’m sorry.” ~



“Yes ma’am,” Nonon nodded. Satsuki seemed so genuinely... aggrieved by the idea Nonon had so glibly considered moments ago that Nonon couldn’t help but think *there must be another way!* But she didn’t see one.

~ “You know your orders. You will proceed overland across the island of Sulawesi, make contact with the local resistance and ally with them, clear the island of obelisks, and proceed to the next. Understood?”~

“Quite clearly, ma’am,” Nonon nodded. This was such a nonconversation that she almost forgot it was Satsuki she was talking to. She hadn’t been told a single thing she hadn’t either already known or been capable of predicting. *I guess I really am on my own out here. Nobody breathing down my neck now.*

After perfunctory goodbyes, Nonon gave the rest of her team the rundown. She and Uzu started picking out the prisoners who fit Satsuki’s description and herding them away. Aikuro and Tsumugu tried to find someone who might act as a spokesperson for the rabble who could help them figure out where the resistance was. Mataro watched sullenly from the dropships. The cultists’ prayers got louder.

The life-fibers pulsed again. That was probably normal, right? Mataro debated telling anyone.

Meanwhile, things were devolving. The locals had spotted the prisoners being loaded onto a dropship and, convinced that a better life would be theirs in Japan, started shouting and rushing towards Uzu and Nonon. Nonon’s initial reaction that she was under attack was quickly dampened when they started thrusting emaciated children forward, screaming, “Take them, please!”

“You don’t want to go where we’re taking them!” Uzu boomed over them in Indonesian (he’d learned it as part of his diplomatic training). “They are the enemy! They will be tortured!”

Of course, the current practices in Japan were a little kinder than that, Uzu lied to try to mollify the crowds. But nobody else knew that, least of all the cultists, and some of the newer recruits started bawling, crying that they renounced everything. Suddenly one of them had enough and bolted for the trees. Over the din Nonon couldn’t issue any commands, but she didn’t have to. Uzu leapt in a high, backflipping arc to land right in front of him, and without so much as moment’s hesitation decapitated him with a clean horizontal slice. The cultists’ prayers got louder.

Okay, the life-fibers were definitely pulsing in a rhythm now. Mataro threw his awareness around, hoping someone else more important noticed this too. No, oh no, everyone else had their hands full. He was the only one who saw! He stood up and, not knowing what else to do, walked towards the holding tanks.

But that, well, Nonon sure as hell noticed that.

“What the fuck! Can’t you just stay still for five minutes?” She shrieked, instantly appearing in front of him.

“Look!” He pointed urgently.

Nonon saw. The rhythm. It was the same as the cultist’s chant. Then she felt something on the edge of her aura sense. Something fast and big and reeking of otherness. She jerked her

head up, and only then noticed that Uzu and Mataro were staring in the same direction. They felt it too.

*Yes, a counterattack was probably to be expected.*

“No,” She murmured. But it was already too late. She only had time to grab Mataro and leap for the trees before it hit.

What happened next was chaos boiled down into a single instant. The thing came by so fast she couldn’t even see it, but she heard the whizzing boom of its passage. If she’d been looking she could’ve seen the glowing lights that trailed from it to ground And then the second, much larger boom as a vast explosion of pure blue light filled the clearing. Nonon had to avert her eyes as she touched down in the underbrush, Mataro landing beside her and instantly dropping prone, hands over his ears.

And then the third noise came, loudest of all. The obelisk, lead core and all, plunged down through the smoke to fall across the beach into the shallow water with an earth shattering kaboom and a shaking Nonon could feel down to her bones. Laying on the ground like that she was sure her eardrums would come loose from the vibrations alone.

And then, just as soon as it had happened, it was over. Stillness filled the air. The wind rustled the trees. No birds would break the silence this time.

Nonon stood up. She wished she hadn’t.

He little kingdom was just... gone. The life-fiber containers smashed open. Bodies strewn everywhere, agent, local, cultist. There were cries of pain amidst the roar of flame. A few agents, miraculously unharmed, were trying to help their fallen comrades.

Nonon’s heart dropped. But not nearly as hard as Saiban’s.

*[They’re dead because we weren’t prepared.]*

“No,” Nonon murmured to herself. What had happened? Where had it all gone? The computers with the technical readouts, the locals who were supposed to lead them to the resistance, hell, her whole fucking *team*. All gone.

But worst of all, those precious dropships. Their one way home, let alone their one way to even *call* home. They were nothing but unrecognizable slag heaps now, flaming blue crisps.

“U-uzu?” Nonon called tentatively, “Uzu? UZU!” The thought that he might be dead hit her with a wave of panic, and she crumpled to her knees without resistance. He’d been right at the epicenter of the explosion, right by the cultists. No way he lived. No way.

“He’s alive,” Mataro said, sitting up next to her. He sounded oddly calm.

“Huh?”

“He’s over there,” He pointed across the clearing. “I can feel him moving on the branches.”

Nonon quickly pulled herself together. That’s right, she had extrasensory abilities too!

*[Aha! Ahahaha! I found him! The boy was right!]* The moment Saiban sensed his aura she sensed him too, and with an overjoyed laugh she got to her feet.

*[It's okay! We're alive!]* Seijitsu called, and now that she was looking Nonon could see the tiny form of her boyfriend drop from a tree and sprint across the wasteland at Kamui speeds. She ran to meet him halfway, and immediately fell into his arms.

“Man, some fuckin’ ride that was. You shoulda seen me flying,” He said to try to lighten the mood, but Nonon just dug her face further into his chest in relief. “Hey, it’s alright, we’ve got Kamui. What can a little bomb do?”

“Oh Uzu, I was scared you – look what they’ve done!” She parted quickly when she noticed Mataro was picking his way through the rubble. Some of the agents were coming along too, beyond relieved that their commander was alright.

But none of that mattered. Without those dropships they were still fucked. And when Satsuki didn’t hear from them.

Oh god, what would she do then? Send the rest of the Korps and leave the country undefended? Send Ryuko?

*Oh god she can't send Ryuko. She wouldn't be stupid enough to send Ryuko. That's just what they want!*

“You’re sure you’re not hurt, right?” Nonon asked quietly.

“I’m fine, really. But what about Aikuro and Tsumugu, are they alive?”

Yes, what about them. Come to think about it, what about the large crowd of locals they’d been talking to? They area they’d been standing in didn’t have nearly enough bodies for the crowd thousands strong to all be lying dead there.

*[Found them]* Saiban said helpfully, and pointed Nonon in the right direction.

“We’ve found them, thank you Saiban,” Nonon nodded, “they’re heading south with the locals, big mass of them, that way.”

Internally, Nonon couldn’t understand that. Why didn’t they come back? Wouldn’t they want to make sure she and the rest were okay? But no matter, the few survivors, less than twenty total who could walk, were in need of her reassurance.

“They’re going to find the resistance,” She declared. “We’ll join them, but first, we need to reestablish contact with home. Which way is the nearest city where we’ll find some internet access?”

“Er, I think it’s called Manado, about two days walk that way,” An agent who was holding a shirt over a piece of shrapnel lodged in his palm offered, grimacing at the act of both trying to staunch the bleeding and think. Commendable. If he survived he was getting a medal for sure.

“Then that’s were we go.”

“But that’s North! We’ve got to regroup south!” Uzu protested.

“Yeah, I know. But we need Satsuki to know we’re still alive before she does anything stupid like sends someone to look for us.”

“We-we aren’t going home?” An agent asked. And it was then that Nonon saw with clarity that she’d already decided that no, that wasn’t an option.

She spat on the ground. “We’ve still got a job to do. The fate of the world might be at stake. We aren’t going anywhere.”

There weren’t any cheers for that. She didn’t expect any. Grim resignation hardened all the faces surrounding her.

And so they left the site of their defeat, where in the deepest crater the blackened bones of the huddled cultists still smoldered.

“Hey, by the way,” Uzu asked Mataro quietly as they vanished into the underbrush. “Did you see the thing that hit us?”

Mataro nodded, “What was it?”

Nonon was walking besides them, high stepping over mud and ferns, “Yes, that- that seems like something I should know. What was it?”

Uzu shrugged, “Something about car sized, kinda...football shaped, but not really. Longer at the ends. Silvery and very shiny. And it had these holes.”

“Yeah, that was the weirdest thing!” Mataro agreed.

“What about ‘em?”

“Well, the holes... the thing was hollow. Nothin’ but black inside.”

Nonon shook her head. This fucking day. She had no idea what she was getting into, what the fuck that thing was, what Satsuki would say when she found out what had happened.

Just so long as she doesn’t send Ryuko. Anything but that.

But who else could she send? Someone needed to protect home. Nonon had to conclude that if she couldn’t win with what she had left... well, she had to win with what she had left.

*I guess I really am on my own out here.*

They trudged on in silence, each of the rag-tag team wanting nothing more than the comfort of their own bed.

Except Mataro. Well, going home wouldn’t be so bad, but there wasn’t time for that now. He was on red alert, wired and ready for any surprise. Because this wasn’t at all what he’d been expecting.

Maybe the type of person who’d survived a month on their own in Honou-town could prove useful now.

~~~~~

“Yup, they’re definitely going North. Probably heading for a big city to make contact with Satsuki,” Aikuro said as he slid down from the tree where he’d been watching the clearing for any movement.

“Makes sense,” Tsumugu said, “It’s what I’d do. Let’s go after them then.’

“Well, hold on now,” Aikuro grabbed his arm before he could go, “You *didn’t* do that though. These people, think about it, where could they go for some degree of safety now?”

All around them the forest filled with the rustling of thousands moving as quietly as though could. Glimpses of calloused feet and skinny, tanned arms waved between the leaves.

“The resistance,” Tsumugu concluded.

“And who’s going to protect them until they get there?”

“Nonon won’t be happy,” Tsumugu sighed.

“No, she won’t. But when we turn this around, with *their* help,” Aikuro spread his arms expansively, “That’s what she really wants.”

Suddenly a voice cut into their conversation, “You are Kamui.”

“I’m... sorry?” Aikuro said in Japanese, momentarily taken off guard by the approach of an old man with very little hair or teeth remaining to him. Signs of a hard life were all over this man if you knew where to look – hunched shoulders, quavering hands, deep lines on pitted cheeks – but he smiled warmly.

“You. Kamui Nekketsu Mikisuki. And you. Kamui Reiketsu Kinagase,” He spoke slowly, clearly not expecting them to know his language.”

“No, no, I’m afraid you’ve got it wrong,” Aikuro knew Indonesian – as part of his Nudist Beach infiltration training he’d learned many languages, both the big ones like English and Spanish and ones more specific to the pacific side of the world. Now he finally got to use it. “We’re Aikuro and Tsumugu. The Kamui,” He reached to touch the eye plate on Reiketsu illustratively (this tickled her, but Tsumugu knew better than to laugh), “We wear the Kamui.”

“Aa-aa-a,” the man made an openmouthed laughing noise, “You can’t fool me so easily! You are Lady Ryuko’s teachers. And now you have come to us in our time of need.”

“Teachers?” Tsumugu said skeptically, “Only thing I can remember teaching her is that ‘there’s more than one way to win a fight’.”

“Hup-hup-hup!” Aikuro shushed him, spoke back in Japanese, “Let’s hear the coot out.”

He switched to Indonesian, “And what if we are?”

“We serve the same mistress, do we not? The others, they’re afraid to speak – say the wrong thing. But what do I care? I thought my time would come slaving on that machine. We all must play our part.”

“I see,” Aikuro went along, “And what is it you’ve come to ask?”

“Ask? We just want to welcome you. In our time of need,” He repeated philosophically, “We shall try our best to please our Lady Ryuko.”

Tsumugu’s eyebrows rose to his hairline, and Reiketsu’s did the same.

*[My, these are indeed the Matoists I’ve heard so much about! Fascinating.]*

“I’d be more impressed by a well-equipped band of Nudists. Not likely around here.”

Aikuro again addressed him in Japanese, grinning, “C’mon man, you know we have to follow this lead. And besides, I don’t think we have a choice,” Every set of eyes they saw through the trees was looking at them, and murmurs drifted through. There was a deepening feeling of suspense in the air.

Finally, Tsumugu relented, “At least they seem to know where they’re going.”

“That’s the spirit!” Aikuro slapped him on the shoulder and then, in Indonesian, “That’s all we needed to hear. Lead on, if you’d please.”

And so, within four hours of arriving, Nonon’s strike force was scattered to the wind. But they were far from helpless. No, they were more dangerous than ever.

Four Kamui had just vanished into the jungle. When faced with a tiger, one must never take their eyes off it. How much more so for a beast that no mortal army can destroy?

## Chapter End Notes

This was a bit of a caffeine bender chapter. I’ll reread it for typos when I get the chance but for now woo I got so much writing done so fast!

# Kiryuin Homestead 2

## Chapter Summary

Okay yeah it doesn't actually take place at Satsuki's house but whatever. Title still stands.

November 2066

~~~~~

*\*What ya doin?\**

Satsuki smiled to herself as she leant back from her desk. A text from Ryuko.

*\*I Just got out of a meeting and am currently drafting ordinances.\**

*\*A meeting at dinner time?\* \*sounds sucky\**

Satsuki decided, hoped, that this was a lead to Ryuko asking when she would be done. Asking if she could come over. She couldn't think of the last time without feeling warm inside. That one time she'd gotten drunk, she remembered asking Ryuko what it was like being in love. Her response, and admittedly Satsuki was paraphrasing here, was that it was nothing less than complete candor and honesty. And after that last time, Satsuki was certain that's what they had.

But it would be breaking schedule. Ryuko knew people would get suspicious past a point. They couldn't. They shouldn't.

*\*Much worse for them, they've been waiting all day to see me\**

*\*rough\* \*seeing youd make it worth it tho\**

*\*I hope you know my ego is not so easily stoked\** Satsuki lied in response. She imagined Ryuko posting a solemn sentry for her all day while she managed affairs of state, all the time desperate for even a glimpse of her. Then it occurred to her that any ordinary day really might feel that way to Ryuko. Would that she were so lucky. *\*And what about you, what are you doing this evening?\**

*\*Actually, Mako and I are going down to Kanagawa\* \*First night with Mataro gone, thought the folks would like some company\* \*You should come too\* \*Mako and I are gonna make dinner\*y'know. If you can\**

That gave Satsuki pause. Yes, that was the right thing to do. Sure, Mataro was the same age – older come to think of it – as she and the Elite were when they founded Honnouji, but he was their youngest and their only son.

And she was the one who, with much trepidation, had approved taking him along. After they'd accepted her into their family. If they were angry with her that was within their rights and

she'd best face the music. And if not, well, it had been a while since she'd paid a visit, and Mako's cooking was – for someone who considered recipes optional at best – quite good, although she could use some work on portion sizes (Satsuki was pretty sure Ryuko, on the other hand, hadn't mastered anything more complicated than toast)

*\*That's a very good idea\* \*I can certainly make time for that\**

*\*Sweet\* \*You at your office?\* \*Can I scoop you on my bike?\**

On her bike. Satsuki felt the warmth spread to her cheeks. Now that, that was a thought too good for this world.

*\*I'm sorry, but that won't do. There's a risk someone will notice\**

*\*Ah shit, you're right\* \*But see you there?\**

*\*Certainly\* \*And if you could, please prepare some extra croquettes for my chauffeur\**

~~~~~

By the time Satsuki got to the old apartment dinner was already in the making, and the sizzling crackle and savory scent of frying oil made the air dense. Before she even had the chance to announce her presence –

“Satsukiiiiiiii!” Mako came tearing out from the kitchen and flung herself at Satsuki in her usual. Satsuki braced like a football player and took the full force hug without flinching.

“Mako, so good to see you,” Satsuki said as she ruffled her hair. Behind Mako came the rest, Sukuyo and Barazo and, of course, Ryuko. Guts chuffed around their feet as they said their hellos. Satsuki hoped nobody noticed that special softer smile that was reserved for Ryuko alone. She was determined to be careful tonight, but with Ryuko's sleeves rolled up and one of Sukuyo's aprons indelicately tied around her waist she just looked too cute.

For her part Ryuko was just a little mortified to be seen by Satsuki wearing something as “housewife-y” as an apron. But Mako was a messy cook, and the apron was already spattered.

“Ooh! One sec!” Sukuyo said excitedly as she detached herself from Satsuki and darted off into her bedroom. She was back in a flash, now carrying Chicken Bone, the very same cat Satsuki had given her two Christmases ago, slung over her shoulder like a sack. He was now a fully-grown cat, overgrown actually - the Mankanshoku portion control issue applied to their pets as well. “Dya remember her? Huh?” She cooed at Chicken Bone, turning around to show him Satsuki.

This was a cat who was used to enthusiastic handling, so when Satsuki stroked him his only reaction was a confused and slightly annoyed expression. “Hmhhh, evidently not,” She chuckled.

“Oof, he's heavy!” Sukuyo said as she dropped the cat and he trotted off, “Almost as heavy as you were, Mako.”

“What!! I was not a heavy baby, no way! I was the perfect size!”



“Hate to break it to you,” Barazo said when Mako looked to him for defense, “But yeah, you were heavy.”

“No way!” Mako held up her hands to her face, “And if I was, then whose fault is that, huh?”

“I don’t think it’s anybody’s –,” Satsuki was interrupted by a hissing noise. A pot on the stove was boiling over.

“Ah shit, I got it!” Ryuko was over in front of the stove faster than a human could see, wiping the boiling water away without any concern for the extreme heat. Mako scrambled back behind her with a yelp.

“Ryuko we gotta get back to work! Now that everyone’s here we gotta hurry or we’ll be bad hosts!”

Ryuko nodded with a smile, “Got it, leave it to me!”

“No wait, you can’t cut onion like that!” Mako, in what was without a doubt a spectacularly dangerous move, grabbed the knife directly from Ryuko’s hand. “You gotta dice it!” She shouted, but then interrupted herself with a gasp, “Oh! Satsuki could help! She’s so good with a sword I bet she’d be handy cutting veggies! Satsuki do you want to help!”

“Oh yeah, Satsuki’s a great cook!” Ryuko replied, getting into Mako’s excitement. For a brief moment Satsuki worried someone might ask how she knew that, but there really was no cause for alarm. She turned to Satsuki, “How ‘bout it?”

And how could she say no? Ryuko handed her the knife – hilt first, she at least understood blade safety.

“Do a trick,” Mako suddenly blurted as Satsuki settled herself in front of the cutting board Ryuko was going to use.

“I’m... sorry?”

“Y’know, like, cut it in half in midair or something! Something cool.”

“We have to eat this,” Satsuki said skeptically.

“Ah, don’t sweat it. If you drop it, the heat’ll burn up all the germs,” Ryuko said.

“I’m not going to drop it. Watch this.” Satsuki had been rolling the onion along the cutting board, trying to think of something that would impress them. *I’ve really come up in the world, now that my fiercest adversary is an onion and not an immortal alien monster.* She set it rolling slowly and holding her hand perfectly steady she dragged the knife in the opposite direction. With one smooth twist of her wrist, the peel fell off and the onion carried on its path uninterrupted.

“Ooooooh!” Mako gasped.

“Heh, that was your classic disarming move, wasn’t it? Just with a little spin to it,” Ryuko said appreciatively, twisting her own wrist illustratively as she said “spin”.

“Do another!”

“Well, why not?” Satsuki permitted herself a small smile of satisfaction, “You said you wanted it diced, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, stand back.” This time, Satsuki went with Mako’s original suggestion. She tossed the onion up, took a step back...

“HAH!” conjuring up the speed and ferocity it had taken to even hold out against Nui when she herself had not a single life-fiber on her, she leveled a brutal flurry of blows right as the onion reached the peak of its travel. It landed, in pieces, right back on the cutting board.

“That look good?” Satsuki asked, but it was drowned out by everyone applauding.

“Wowie! Ryuko, can you do that?”

“Pssh, sure I can, I can move faster than the human eye, that’s child’s play.”

“That may be so,” Satsuki said, pretending to be more insulted than she really was, “but can you do it with anything close to the same precision and grace?”

“... give me the knife.” Ryuko had already flung open the fridge for another onion

Ryuko’s replication of Satsuki’s stunt was even faster, resulted in even tinier pieces, but they didn’t land in quite so neat a pile. So Satsuki took another, and managed to cut it even more neatly. Incensed, Ryuko finally went all out.

“Aha! Take that!” Ryuko crowed as her pieces landed – not in a pile, but instead a perfect stack like a miniature skyscraper. Sure, she had used her hands, but it had been so fast there was no physical way anybody noticed.

“Why you little -,” Satsuki gasped, lost in the competition. She went to the fridge for another onion.

“Ah, you guys? We don’t, ah, we don’t need that many!” Mako looked uncommonly flustered.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Barazo said, leaning into the kitchen.

“I knowwww!”

~~~~~

After dinner, Satsuki volunteered to do the dishes, since really all she’d done to help cook was make an unnecessary amount of sliced onions that would now sit in a bin in the fridge. But she didn’t know where they all went, so now it was her and Sukuyo in the kitchen, and the work went briskly.

Satsuki felt fuller than she had in years, at least, and it wasn’t exactly a pleasant feeling. She felt slow, and she hated feeling slow. But at least she was doing better than Ryuko. With her naturally low appetite Ryuko was all but passed out on the couch, clutching at her belly as Mako

played with her hair. Barazo meanwhile had wandered off to play with the VR rig that filled most of Mataro's room – he'd been too poor as a kid to afford video games so now that Mataro had his blindfold and couldn't use it Barazo took it over.

Sukuyo was humming a little tune, appearing quite casual and laid back. But Satsuki knew better, she could read the tension in her shoulders. She was handling Mataro's absence as best she could, but...

*At least she's not mad at me, I guess.*

"Have you heard from Jakuzure yet?"

Satsuki's back straightened. This was the first time Mataro had been mentioned tonight.

"Yes, this morning. Things are going well, they won their first battle easily."

"Oh, this morning? Well, that's good."

Satsuki nodded, "I'm sorry, I know that's a while ago. I'm having Nonon report back once every day unless something comes up." (Of course, something had already come up, but Satsuki would find that out tomorrow)

"No no, it's not a problem. I was just curious."

"Well, I'll keep you posted about what happens every day."

"... Thank you."

They carried on working, but suddenly Sukuyo stopped, put the plate she was carrying down.

"I know I shouldn't be worried," She said, almost to herself. "Your friends are good fighters, he's not in any real danger."

"I gave you my word that Mataro would be safe. I wouldn't have let him go if I didn't think they were capable of keeping him safe."

Sukuyo nodded.

"But I would be surprised if you weren't worried, I don't take it as an offense against our abilities" Satsuki admitted, looking directly at Sukuyo for the first time in this conversation.

Sukuyo's eyes were glassy.

"Why did I let him go?" She asked in a strained voice.

Satsuki didn't have an answer. She wished Barazo were in the room, her husband would know what to do. But for Satsuki, this felt wrong somehow. This was all backwards, she didn't know how to comfort a woman whose job might as well be comforting others.

Satsuki could feel Mako's worried eyes on the back of her head.

"I think it was brave of you. I'm not sure if I would have done it in your place."

Sukuyo nodded, but she was stilling looking blankly at the counter.

“Oh, fine, fine. Come here,” Satsuki overcame herself and went to Sukuyo, pulling her into a hug. Suddenly Mako was there too, sandwiching Sukuyo and squeezing her far tighter than Satsuki felt comfortable doing.

“He’s gonna be fine Mom, don’t you worry,” she said softly.

Ryuko shook herself out of her catatonic stupor now and came over too. Satsuki hadn’t expected this to turn into a dogpile, but in retrospect she should’ve. It seemed to work though, she could feel Sukuyo’s breath slow and normalize.

“Thank you. Really. But, ah, Mako, you’re squishing me just a little.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry sorry!” Mako struggled to disconnect herself, but once she did Satsuki got back to work, and Mako and Ryuko popped up onto the counter. The atmosphere still felt quite solemn though, they could all feel it, as though Sukuyo’s anxiety had only been reduced by offloading some onto the rest of them. Nobody spoke.

“You know, out myself and all my elites, only Shiro Iori has a mother who ever worried about him.”

“Wait, really? But Ira...”

“Oh, you know his parents quite well at this point I’m sure. They would have considered it an honor if their son died for a worthy cause.”

“Hah!” Sukuyo laughed suddenly, and Satsuki felt a rush of pride at managing to break her sour mood “I suppose they would. Oh, I could tell you stories about his mother, I’ve never seen a woman with such big biceps! Or so loud!”

“I dunno, I think mine are pretty good,” Ryuko said lightly, flexing, “And Satsuki, you’re even more built!”

“Oh believe me, it’s nothing compared to Mrs. Gamagoori,” Satsuki said, fighting down a blush.

“This one time, she – oh, but I shouldn’t make fun of future inlaws,” She winked at Mako, who did blush, from neck to forehead.

“Eep! MoOom if you jump the gun like that it won’t happen!” She ducked her head under her hands as though dodging an invisible bullet.

“Oh, sorry sweetie, sorry!”

“Well, Ira’s parents have the same... martial attitude he shares,” Satsuki went on, “and then Nonon, her parents doted on their heir, her older brother, exclusively. Houka: absentee father, single mother, he provided for her but he never really *listened* to her. And then Uzu, well, he never knew his parents. And then you have me.”

*And without mothers, we all turned out hardened killers. But he wants to do the same,* Satsuki thought, and she could see a smile building on Sukuyo’s face as she realized the first part. The second didn’t seem to matter much to her.

“He’s lucky to have you.”

~~~~~

The evening passed by and the girls still hadn’t taken their leave. Night fell, the parents turned in for the night, and they stayed sitting on the cramped little balcony, watching the sky fade to the lavender of a city night.

“Man, this place is gonna be empty now that Mataro’s out,” Ryuko said, knocking back the last of a glass of wine and stretching herself out on the ground between Mako and Satsuki. When she lifted her arms above her head, her shirt rode up, and Satsuki’s eyes were drawn to that little sliver of bare belly before she even realized it.

She remembered what Ryuko said about Mako having already figured out Ryuko’s feelings for her.

“I knowww,” Mako said thoughtfully. “Our old room is so empty, we took everything we had.”

“It doesn’t feel right. You ever miss the days when it was all of us crashing right in the middle of the old hut?”

“Yeah, kinda. It’s like with the fight club, but… nah, we’ve all got phones now, we can talk whenever we want.”

“Yeah, and I try to stay in contact. But it’s not the same…”

“You know, when I approved the fight club, I hoped that it would lead to you assimilating into Honnouji. But I also had the backup plan of simply using it to bond you even closer together. Don’t tell me it worked too well, now,” Satsuki commented.

“Wha? So *that’s* why you let us do it!” Mako gasped at the revelation.

“Nah, nah, not too well,” Ryuko answered Satsuki, “I just… never had that kind of family before. I don’t want us to get that distant. But we all gotta grow up eventually, I guess,” Ryuko said philosophically.

“It’s not all bad though! New friends, new places, you’ve got your awesome penthouse!”

“Well yeah, but like, I dunno, you ever feel like you should just drop out and come home? I mean, I do like at least once a week. I’m rotten at college, and besides, if fashion design’s what I really want to do I don’t need a degree, do I?”

*Oh no, not after how much sweat I put into pulling you through high school! I know you could easily ace every class if only you put your mind to it.* Satsuki thought, but she didn’t get a chance to voice that. And besides, she did know full well that a traditional education only worked for some careers.

“Nuh-uh! I gotta stay until I’m done now! I gotta get my degree or else what’s the point?”

“So you’re giving up slacking, are you?” Satsuki asked.

“Satsuki! How dare you accuse me of something like that?” Mako acted scandalized but couldn’t hold it together and started laughing. “I just slack some of the time now!”

“Hmhm. And what will your degree be in? I never asked.”

“I’m gonna be a coach!”

“A... coach?”

Ryuko sat up, “Well, not exactly a coach.”

“Oh, you know what I mean.”

“I don’t think Sats does though.”

“Fine, fine. Not a coach, but like a coach for singers!”

“Oh, a talent agent.”

“Yu-huh! Nonon’s got so many singers, and this one time I asked how she found them all. She said I was real dumb for not knowing though,” Mako pouted.

“Well, that sounds like a career you’d be admirably suited for.”

“Uh... thanks?”

“Yeah that’s a good thing Mako,” Ryuko mediated between Satsuki’s old-timey verbiage and Mako, “I thought she’d be good at it too.”

“It’s like being a cheerleader!” Mako gushed, “The best agent is like a super cheerleader for their singer or actor or whatever!”

“And I mean, you were my cheerleader back at Honnouji, weren’t you?”

“Mhmm!”

Satsuki smiled as she listen to the two besties chatter, pondering the possibility of one day hiring her – as the agent for the Kamui Korps. Then they’d really all be together. Yes, if she’d take the job, then it was hers.

~~~~~

“Hey, can I stay the night? I know it’s not on our schedule, but it’s *really* late.”

Now Ryuko and Satsuki were riding in her limo back towards Tokyo. Satsuki had seen this coming; she knew Ryuko would have something to drink and wouldn’t want to sober back up, and she was more than happy to bring along a car large enough to strap Ryuko’s bike to.

“Oh, I suppose I can make an exception,” Satsuki sighed, and Ryuko beamed as she nestled her head on Satsuki’s shoulder. That made it worth it, and Satsuki let out a long, deeply relieved sigh as she threaded her arm around Ryuko’s shoulder, meeting her hand and interlocking fingers. “Just this once.”

“Heh, I knew I could get you to cave.”

“Cave?”

“Yeah. I didn’t even have to use my secret weapon.”

Satsuki laughed through her nose, “Secret weapon? What do you mean, I wonder?”

“Oh, nothin’,” Ryuko giggled, intoxicated on more than just alcohol. She’d have to thank Mataro when he got back – he left, and she got this fun night of knife tricks, heartwarming moments, deep talks with her bestie who she didn’t get to see nearly often enough, and now this. With her head swimming, Satsuki looked, *felt* larger than life to her now. She’d been so sweet and sensitive with Sukuyo – Ryuko had always thought it better if only she got to see that side of her, but no, the big softie Satsuki was inside had to be shared with the world. “Here, I’ll show ya.”

When she guided Satsuki’s hand down to her chest and saw her eyebrows rise, she giggled again.

“C’mon, I know you’re still a little freaked about touching me, but you gotta face fears at some point, right?”

Satsuki didn’t answer, at least not verbally. But she pulled Ryuko closer until she was practically on her lap, and didn’t move her hand.

“That’s what I thought.”

After a while riding in comfortable silence, Satsuki said, “It’s nice to hear that Mako is making something of herself, isn’t it?”

“Oh, totally. I always thought something like that would suit her. She’s a people person, after all.”

“Hmm, spoken like someone who thinks they’re not.”

“Well, not as much as *Mako*. Nobody is as much as Mako.”

“This is true. But speaking of, have you given any thought to what you’re gonna do now?”

“Hmm? Whaddya mean?”

“Well, you can’t fight, and I think you seemed pretty eager to get to grips with REVOCS during the attack.”

“Fuck,” Ryuko leaned her head back, “I hate that. I just want it to be over.”

“I know you do. And you want to charge right in and end it.”

“Fuck.”

“But you can’t just sit around bemoaning that until it’s over, can you? So what will you do?”

“I dunno... I mean, I’m a good training partner for ‘em because they can actually cut me up, and I’ll keep going in to absorb life-fibers so I’m as strong as I can be if some day they figure out how to get her out of me. What? You’re lookin’ at me like that’s not enough.”

Satsuki sighed, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. Although, I guess I do agree with that assessment. You could be doing more, if you want. And I think you do.”

Satsuki saw Ryuko’s vision sharpened nearly imperceptibly and she sat up. She’d sobered herself up. “I mean, what else is there? Really, a lot of shit’s changed recently, can’t I just go to classes and pitch in where I can? Y’know, keep at least that normal?”

“I thought you said you wanted to drop out of college.”

“Well, nah, I – wait, do *you* think I should?” Ryuko had always suspected that if she told Satsuki that she’d be pissed.

“No. But, if it would make you happier, well, I do love seeing you smile.”

“Well yeah, but... I dunno, what would I do then?”

“Anything, really. But you shouldn’t drop out, you don’t need to. At the same time though I won’t lie, I want to see you help the war effort - help *me*. And you can do so much without fighting.”

“Pssh, yeah okay. I know where my talents are, alright? I helped by making clothing already, and now I can’t help by fighting, so what else can I do?”

“I won’t argue with you about talents now, although you are wrong, and you have to learn that someday. But more than just talents, you have so much else going for you.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Don’t be dense, Ryuko. You could change the world with a single speech. The people love you and they won’t stop loving you. They *want* to know more about you. Why, when you went on TV that time – I think we would’ve been bombarded by bad press when you made the Kamui if it weren’t for you having already said that you are made of life-fibers. It warmed everyone up to the idea of using them”

“Well sure, but -,”

“You don’t have to be my mouthpiece, no not at all. We can help you do the reading, find out what you want to say. Like, we have the Kiryuin Foundation, my charitable foundation for spending all our money. We could put you in charge of that!” Satsuki had considered it before, but just now realized that if Ryuko wanted it enough that could really work, “Ryuko Matoi, the great humanitarian. It wouldn’t interrupt your life any more than anything else. Just tell them what to spend on, do speeches a few times.”

“Ehh, that sounds like something you want to do.”

“I do, but is that that wrong? What I mean is this: I know you want to live a normal life, I don’t want to interrupt that. But -,”

“- But my life’s obviously not normal, I know,” Ryuko grunted.



“No, not that. Think about this. Everybody in life is striving for something, and at the top – the end of every path – is to change the world. A normal life is just one step on the pyramid up. You’ve already changed the world more than... *anyone*, ever. You saved it, and one way or another you’ll be remembered for it forever. But why stop there? You know the world needs fixing, and your memory, your *legend* can be of fixing it.”

“... No, I suppose you’re not *wrong*, but,” But what? Ryuko was afraid, terribly afraid of what Satsuki was suggesting. Getting up on stage, speak to... the whole world? She could hear but couldn’t believe Satsuki’s suggestion that they would love her no matter what. And what, was she supposed to be like a mini dictator? A new old Satsuki? “I don’t want all that power. I know I’m the only one who has it. But I don’t want to be someone who makes people do things, commands them.”

“Hmmm,” Satsuki paused to think, “Well, you hardly have to command the world. They just want to know about the woman who saved them. Set an example and they’ll follow it.”

“...But I’m not... but I’m not really a good example to follow.”

“No, Ryuko. Look at me,” Ryuko complied, and what she saw on Satsuki’s face was arresting. A perfect blend of fierce determination and complete tenderness. Satsuki believed in her unreservedly. She knew that now.

*I’m not just a hero to the world, I’m a hero to her.*

“You taught me to love and respect all of humanity. The old me. I realized, in my time in Ragyo’s cage, that everyone in the world had the same ability to be decent and noble and good. To be Ryuko. But more than that, more than that, everyone in the world is someone else’s Ryuko. They might not have saved the world, but to someone everyone – even if it’s just their own mother – *is* the world. And if you could teach the old me that, well – Oh, Ryuko are-you alright?”

Ryuko nodded, wiped a tear away from her cheek. “Ah geez, I thought I was totally sober. But look at me here, total softie. I must still be drunk.”

Satsuki pressed her lips to where the tear had been, “Drunk or not, you’re still my Ryuko. And I want your name to be synonymous with goodness around the world. Do you want that?”

“That sounds... could you really do that?”

“*We* can. So what do you say, do you want to change the world with me?”

Ryuko sniffled. This wasn’t what she expected tonight. Mataro definitely deserved all her thanks for making it happen. She thought, *again and again I get reminded that she loves me so much. Maybe more than she’s ever loved everything else. I’m gonna be worthy of her.* She remembered what she’d thought, laying on the grass behind the mansion, looking out at the distant mountains. *Yes, I’m gonna be worthy of the whole world.*

“Oh, what the hell.”

And that was how Ryuko Matoi entered the public sphere. She didn’t know it yet, but she wouldn’t be getting out any time soon.

# Ring of Fire: Pickpocket

## Chapter Summary

Okay time for the true reason this one got delayed:

I rewrote the second half of it. I'm happy to try to write as fast as I can (and to be fair I *\*was\** pretty busy this week), but when I'm not happy with something it's hard to face up to that because it means I have to fall behind schedule. Anyway I like the end of this part now, but please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November 2066

~~~~~

Nonon woke up with the rising sun searing through the canopy and such a brutal cramp in her neck that it took her a full minute to try to move it. Well, that was to be expected for sleeping in the crook of a tree all night; the ground – no, not in a million years was that an option. Curling her little self up between the branches was infinitely, infinitely preferable to being down there in the mud and the rotting leaves, sharing a mattress with centipedes and spiders and god only knew what else.

But it was still the *fucking worst*.

Oh, and did she mention that she was still *exhausted*? Like, lead-limbed, eyes-unfocused, please-just-let-me-sleep exhausted? Not only had she stayed up half the night posting watch; she and Uzu had split the job given their extrasensory abilities – and if you're going to ask why she didn't use Mataro just... no. So not only that, but then the damn tree was so uncomfortable, and she couldn't – just *couldn't* stop worrying. The same damn loop and she knew she had to sleep, but how could she when every time she closed her eyes, she saw her doom closing in.

Surrounded, overwhelmed by sheer numbers. She and Uzu could escape even if there were so many that their superior strength wasn't enough, but then she'd hear the screams of her soldiers dying as she abandoned them. And the boy... dammit what the fuck, why was it particularly frightening to picture his dead body on the ground? For the first time on this trip, she was forced to seriously consider the possibility of his funeral. Feeling premature pain at how devastated his mother would be, well, that made sense. But why was it just as awful to think of how Satsuki, or the slacker, or even *Ryuko* would take it? She felt like it was already inevitable, and it was going to be worse than death.

Some other time, she might've considered what that reaction said about her. But for now, all she could do was huddling there trembling with fear. It didn't help that at one point she felt that *thing* that had bombed them zoom by. Fortunately, it was nearly a kilometer east of them, just a bare blip

on Saiban's aura sense. It still had her eyes wide and her breathing clipped and panicked. Thank god no one was awake to see her.

Except Saiban, who was not helping

*[Your blood sugar is so low. Please let them have some food.]* Saiban whined, and the twisting of her stomach backed him up.

"No, no, it's fine," She murmured to him. He was doing his best to put the big pictures fears behind him, let Nonon worry about that, and just focus on the practical concerns that kept them going moment to moment. But that just annoyed her.

Uzu heard her, and it felt like it took forever for him to get up from where he sat at the foot of the tree, dry shaving with a machete, and clamber up until he was crouched next to her. Seijitsu was already powered up, and with her huge shoulder-spikes he barely fit.

"You doin' alright?"

*How the fuck do you think I'm doing? I've just fucked the first and probably only op I'll ever be put in charge of and now I have to try and figure out a way out this mess only how am I supposed to do that when I can't even get a good night's rest and the damn birds won't shut up and to top it all off I have to watch your smug face parade around like this is all some goddamn adventure!*

"Uh huh," Nonon answered.

"You're the first one up," He said softly, "You gonna let 'em get a little more rest or..."

*Oh, they're getting up. If I can't get a good night's sleep, then none of them get to, and that's that. How far away was this slum anyway, two days? Fuck that. We're getting there tonight if I have to drag them.*

She shook her head. "Wake them up, quietly."

"Alright. Oh, you want this?" He held out a hand, and to Nonon's shock there was some kind of... strange plant parts on his palm. Nonon's face must've been horrified, because he said, "What? It's just seeds. Mataro and I've been munchin' 'em like all night, trust me they're fine. Don't taste too bad either."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Nonon hissed accusatorially.

"Well yeah," Uzu took that as a no and tossed the seeds into his mouth casually, "Reminds me of the old days before Satsuki grabbed me up for Honoujji," He looked back and her and saw that her face remained scrunched with displeasure, "I mean, it's only a couple nights, right?"

"Just do your job," Nonon said flatly.

"Hey, sorry babe, I-,"

"-Wait. How's my hair?" Nonon stopped him as he turned to go.

"Uh. It's... not good," Uzu struggled to break it easily to her, but it the humidity had taken that soft pink hair, already prone to frizziness, and run wild with it

“Ach! I knew it, it’s ruined.”

“I mean, I don’t know what you expected. It’s no big deal.”

“No big deal? How am I supposed to command any respect looking like this?” She pouted, throwing her hands up.

“I think you’re fine, really,” Uzu shrugged, but the stare he got back from Nonon wasn’t withering like before. She looked lost, vulnerable. Everything had gone wrong and she couldn’t even keep her own hair straight.

Uzu held out his shaving knife

“Oh, fine.”

And so when Nonon clambered down from her treetop perch it was with her once mid-back length locks cropped down not even to her shoulders. To her agents who were groggily pulling themselves off makeshift blankets made from wadded overcoats a change had gone through her. Before she’d been the imperious, aloof Lady Jakuzure who’d overseen her kingdom from the scaffolds of the machine and deigned not to talk to them. Now it was just Nonon, and she meant business.

The first thing to do, then, was to take stock of what was left. Everyone turned out their pockets, and what little they had was distributed as evenly as possible. As far as weapons went, they had about fifteen needle guns so just about every combat-fit man or woman could have one, a couple cases of jamming needles someone had been thoughtful enough to bring, one rocket launcher and a couple rockets, everyone’s combat knives, a few grenades and explosive charges, and of course Nonon and Uzu’s hardened life-fiber weapons (which were expected to do all the real work). It wasn’t much, but it would do.

Medical supplies, well, that was another story. Most of them had already been used patching up everyone’s wounds, and they were straight up out of any kind of disinfectant. Uzu knew some herbal remedies from when he lived with his gang in the woods as a middle schooler, but that didn’t help much considering he didn’t know the local plants.

*[Well, we just have to keep anyone from getting hurt]* Saiban declared pragmatically.

*Easier said than done.*

Food wasn’t a real issue, even despite how hungry Nonon was. Enough ration bars for everyone to get by on for two days, and if somehow they ran out it was *possible*, if degrading, to forage for something from the landscape. She had everyone eat one right away. These were dense little rectangles of indeterminate food similar in consistency to a protein bar, each one carrying a full meal’s worth of nutrients. They tasted awful, chemical-y, but nobody complained. So everything seemed not quite so bad as Nonon feared until it came to the last thing.

Water.

Yes, she’d been warned that the water here was no good for drinking. Too polluted, too brimming with bacteria, and most of it was brackish anyway. She’d assumed this wouldn’t be a problem. But now everyone had only what water they currently carried in their canteens.

And she and Uzu didn't have canteens. Where would they put them on a Kamui?

She was so occupied worrying about this that she wasn't really paying attention when she said, "Alright, anything else? Let's just see whatever other random crap you have."

Wasn't paying attention, that was, until Mataro produced a little roll of white, disc shaped pills from his pocket. The other miscellaneous objects the agents had – toolboxes, grappling rope, jumper caples – was all obviously useful, but this –

"Okay, what the hell? Where'd you get those?" She spat accusatorially, and all of a sudden the whole circle was looking at the scrawny teenage with the long ponytail and the ill fitting bulletproof vest sitting in their midst, who everyone but Uzu had been studiously ignoring.

"Shiro gave them to me," He answered defiantly.

"Bullshit. Hand 'em over."

Mataro did as instructed, and Nonon recognized with a disappointed "ohh" noise that the packaging did have the Research Complex's logo on it. "He said not to let anyone else have them."

~~ *The previous day* ~~

"If you ever feel like your life is in immediate danger, put one of these in your mouth and crunch it. They're very fast acting, so once you swallow it just stay safe for a moment longer and it'll do its work," Shiro had instructed him, and when Mataro looked skeptical he said, "What, did you really think we'd let you out there with some kind of insurance policy? Your mother would kill us."

"The main component is the active ingredient of adderall, but at a much higher dosage than normal. These are highly experimental, but there are other components in here that will make it possible for you to process them safely. Not anybody else though, especially not anybody with a lower life-fiber compatibility. These are specially built for you alone."

"Uh, thanks?" Mataro had answered, still confused to be suddenly stopped by Shiro and Houka literally right before he was about to board the dropship.

"Oh, don't thank us," Houka had chuckled, "Your report back, if you use them, will be thanks enough." That had creeped Mataro out, and it was at that point he decided it was time to go.

~~~~~

Nonon grunted again, "What are they?"

"Adderall."

"Seriously, ADD medicine? Eh, I shoulda guessed you'd have something like that," she chucked the pills back his way, "Well, there are worse pharmacists out there than Shiro, I suppose."

Mataro slipped Shiro's "insurance policy" into his pocket as the rag-tag team packed up their campsite and set off into the jungle.

~~~~~

They travelled along the main road – a crummy, poorly maintained two-lane but still the main road – keeping just far enough away so Nonon and Saiban could sense any vehicles passing by on the edge of their aura awareness. Which was quite far away, no chance of anyone seeing them. But it didn't make the going easy.

For Nonon and Uzu it wasn't so bad at all. Once they had some food in them they were loping across the forest floor more like great apes than humans, great leaping bounds without any sort of pause between them, and at any point one of them would be scouting forwards while the other stayed back to guard the non-superpowered as they trudged clumsily through the underbrush.

They carried on like this until the early afternoon, when a prickling on the edge of Nonon's awareness told her to call everyone to a halt.

"They're coming!" She shushed everyone as that sense went from a prickle to a sharp, very distinct line of powerful aura trailing up the road from the direction they'd come. And then, as everyone crouched into the brush and crept up to get a view of the road, the rumbling of a swarm of engines preceded the enemy army.

Sleek black APCs plated with unadorned shaped armor rolled past at shockingly fast speeds. On top of each, soldiers sat behind turrets wearing the *Cornicen* model of Mk. 2 Ultima Uniform – a long ranged variety capable of firing destructive beams of sound and light from shoulder mounted cannons that sort of resembled brass instruments made of purple-black metal. Nonon and Saiban could feel that inside each one dozens of other men and woman sat (not that that wasn't obvious).

"There's a lot more of them than Satsuki thought there would be," Nonon whispered to Saiban as the column kept going and going into the distance.

*[They must be going to attack the city we're headed for,]* He observed, and Nonon concluded he was right.

"Everyone, get moving," she ordered quietly, standing up and grabbing a packet of explosive charges. Then, to Uzu, "Guard them until I get back."

Understanding her plan, Uzu nodded. She bolted off and was gone in an instant, and the rest of the group continued on. In a few minutes she rejoined them, somewhat muddier than before but looking grimly eager, and then somewhere up ahead a series of loud explosions rung out.

"Teeheehee!" Nonon giggled, waving for everyone to hurry up. "That should slow 'em down! Even more so if they decided to go looking for us. Speaking of, move it people!"

In a little bit they passed Nonon's other obstacle, a pile of uprooted trees and mud stacked as high as a small house across the road. The REVOCS soldiers had their strength boosted by their uniforms, so they'd be able to clear it, but now they were far behind Nonon and her survivors.

Every time Uzu or Nonon went to scout ahead they made another barricade just like it.

This kept them well in the lead until evening came, and now Nonon could tell they were getting closer. Scattered villages and farms showed up, then gave way to small towns of low clay buildings. All abandoned.

Life was rough in Indonesia, like most of the world these days, and had been getting worse. A lot of the towns were abandoned years ago as people gave up on a broken, desperate

society and moved to primitive subsistence farming, and so there were weeds and vines growing up through these buildings and some were barely recognizable. But there were others, empty but pristine, nothing but loose scraps of trash and stray dogs on the streets. These ones had been emptied by REVOCS in their search for slaves. Nonon felt she really understood now that it had been less than a day since the attack had begun, and the horror of how hard they must've worked these poor people to make so much progress on their Obelisks sunk in.

Mataro was especially jumpy passing through these towns. They felt too much like Honou-town had. Ever shadow in a doorway was a COVER lurking, waiting.

~~~~~

By the time the sky was orange the hum of the APCs was back. This time they had little chance of staying ahead forever, they needed to sleep and were desperately low on water. Every canteen dry, every mouth even dryer. Nonon set up one last trap and they sat on the edge of a small town, looking dejectedly as REVOCS crept up to the trap and... turned down the dirt road into the town.

*[Oh! They need to sleep too! Lucky us!]* Seijitsu realized with a happy chirp, and Nonon giggled at her good fortune. Finally, finally some good news!

"They have water," Uzu observed with the same excitement. Everyone else was watching like vultures as the soldiers circled their APCs around the village and began to disembark.

"And food," Someone else said.

"And medical supplies."

*[And life-fibers,]* Saiban murmured hungrily. Nonon lead everyone up to the edge of the forest, across a marshy, overgrown rice paddy from the village. Uzu slid up next to her, as well as the highest ranking surviving agent. And Mataro.

"And prisoners," He said, pointing, and when Nonon followed his finger she realized with a sinking feeling that he was right. Locals in manacles were being unloaded from some of the APCs and rounded up in the village square. Apparently not all the people they'd enslaved in this area had been at the Obelisk that was destroyed yesterday.

"Fuck, that complicates things." Nonon murmured. Uzu looked at her, "If we keep them in front of us," Nonon answered his unspoken question of "*could we take them*". By her count there were hundreds of them, individually no threat, but – fuck, there were a lot of those *Huskarl* models with their irritatingly strong energy fields. She shook her head, "If it were just us. But we can't risk them getting behind us and killing our guys. Or the prisoners."

Uzu looked taken aback. "This a golden opportunity here. You really want us to just do nothing?"

"No! You serious? We wait 'til their sleeping."

"They'll have guards posted then. We should go now, while they're still confused."

"Nuh-uh. Look at how many of them are around the prisoners right, they'll kill them soon as they see us."

“Then they die before they can see us.”

Nonon side-eyed him skeptically, but her head whipped back around when a yelp rang out from the camp. Something was going on by the prisoners. A teenage girl was on the ground, cringing from a slap across her face from a blank faced man wearing a *Huskarl* model. Even from here Nonon could see her cheek turning purple.

Nonon and Uzu took this in without comment. They’d seen – and done – worse, though that was necessary sacrifice to save the world. This was pure contempt for human life. But it *looked* the same.

Mataro shifted uncomfortably. Nonon saw that he was “looking” (she still hadn’t figured out what to call it when someone with shingantsu directed their attention at something) at the prisoners intently and groaned.

“Oh, don’t you dare go thinking with your dick now,” Mataro glared at her with defiant anger, but he held his tongue, “Look, we are going to rescue them, okay? Just not this moment.”

*[But we have to do something!]* Seijitsu said, earnestly terrified for the prisoners.

*[No, it’s fine.]* Saiban responded *[Let our humans handle the tactics. They’re experts.]*

*[...Uzu!]* Seijitsu shouted urgently into his head.

“I’m going in,” He declared as he started to stand, but Nonon grabbed him.

“The fuck you are! Sit back down! That’s an order!” She hissed. And then she noticed an aura shifting next to her. Moving away.

Mataro had vanished into the underbrush with a near-silent rustle. His armor and helmet lay discarded where he’d been crouched.

“Oh hell,” Nonon groaned as she watched a golden opportunity vanish. At least, that’s what she thought.

~~~~~

Mataro was scared out of his wits. They were going to see him, and they were going to shoot him. He’d been shot at before, by enraged Honou-town shopkeepers with worn out shotguns, but this was totally different. He knew what those sound blasters did to people. Getting spotted would kill him.

And if he somehow made it back alive, Nonon would kill him.

*I just hope she doesn’t jump down on top of me and blow my cover before I – wait, what am I doing?* He was about halfway across the field, deep in the reeds and the mud, before he came to the realization that his initial plan to rescue that girl was just... not possible. He stopped, considered turning around. *No, no fucking way I’m facing Nonon without something to show for it.*

*What would Ryuko do?* He thought, as though he even had to ask. She would charge in head first, and that would just get him killed. *Come to think of it, the one time she tried that before she got Senketsu she got her ass handed to her. And these guys aren’t Honouji they’ve got guns!*



Fortunately, the dry, sticky feeling in his mouth answered the question for him. *Water. Yeah, if I can just grab some water it'll be worth it.*

He crept up closer, senses trained on the troopers in the APC turrets. They were alert, paranoid even, but fortunately they were looking out for a Kamui speeding across the field like a human sized bullet. Not a half-grown kid in a muddy tank-top slinking ever closer with all the caution years of pick-pocketing had taught him.

*God I hope I'm not rusty – oh shit he's going to see me!* It had been so long since he'd first felt the power of shingantsu, and since then navigating without his eyes had become second nature. He could feel where the enemy soldiers were, feel where they were looking, feel where they were *going* to look. He ducked down even further with plenty of time before the nearest soldier's gaze slid over him. And then it carried on none the wiser.

And Mataro realized with a rising thrill that he wasn't the blind one here.

~~~~~

Nonon didn't know why she let him go. Nothing rational, that was for sure. She just had this feeling, that moronic as he was he'd still have enough self-preservation to turn around. But the minutes crept by and he made it up to the APC ring and vanished behind it, and she could still feel his aura sliding around. No gunfire. No shouting. And the feeling became replaced with a new one. That's right, he'd survived in a COVER infested Honou-town, hadn't he? Maybe, maybe he could actually do this.

And when he came back with a case of water in each hand and a sleeping bag under each arm she didn't know how the fuck to feel. Eventually she settled on relieved. And angry.

"Holy shit you actually did it!" Uzu exclaimed as he climbed down the tree he'd been watching from. He'd never really doubted his apprentice's abilities and he clapped him on the shoulder and took one of the water cases.

"Like taking candy from a baby. You ever try using shingantsu to steal? It's amazing, everyone's walking around looking at only one thing at a time!" He turned to Nonon, who was glaring at him, and his expression seemed to ask her "*and what do you want?*"

"Next time you do something like that fucking tell me first!" She shouted as he set his haul down and brushed his hands off.

"Well if I *told* you, you wouldn't have let me," He shot back, flush with victory and all but ready to dart back off to grab more. So much water, so many palettes of ration bars, they'd never notice they were gone!

"Damn right I wouldn't have!"

"See? Be happy," He replied defiantly, tossing her one of the sleeping bags, "there you go, *your majesty.*"

In response, before Mataro could react even with shingatsu, she rushed at him and stretched her arm as far as it could go, lifting him up by the chin.

"You. Will. Address. Me. Properly."

“Glurrrk!” He couldn’t exactly respond.

She threw him down on the ground, planted a heeled foot on his cheek

“Nonon, c’mon, don’t do this” Uzu murmured plaintively.

“Say it.”

“I-I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“No, not ma’am, you can do better,” A little more pressure, and half his face was pressed into the mud.

In a strangled voice, he finally answered, “I-I’m sorry, Lady Nonon.”

Nonon smirked, “That’s better.” She lifted her foot off of Mataro and he pulled himself off the ground with a gasp.

“Crrrist!” He exclaimed.

“Well, I don’t know what you expected, honestly,” Uzu said, feeling much better now that he had a few gulps of water in him. “We are in the military, don’t forget.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Mataro muttered. Brushing browned leaves off his ponytail, he turned towards the jungle.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Nonon asked, leaning on her naginata.

“Uh... wait, you want me to -,”

“Yup. Turn around, do it again. We’re not leaving until we’ve got enough for everyone.”

~~~~~

Five or so trips later, and despite herself Nonon had warmed up to this new strategy. She’d never admit it, but she was... impressed at what a good combo some mediocre pickpocketing skill and not yet fully mastered shingantsu could be. Sleeping bags for everyone, plenty of ration bars, the medical supplies to fix anything that could reasonably happen to them, and water, delicious clean water, as much as they could carry.

She wasn’t the only one who was impressed. The agents were warming up to the kid now, and every time he brought back something extra audacious – a sleeping soldier’s gun, the keys to an APC (those were smashed in case they had a tracker in them, but it was still an achievement). It was dark now, and that only made it easier. What had been a terror fueled death march all day had somehow turned into something much more pleasant, sitting around in a clearing just watching as he went back and forth. It was like a game, and the agents chattered idly, betting on what he’d bring back this time

Mataro was on top of the world, completely lost in the art of it. It was like festival days back in Honou-town, when everyone crowded around whatever TV they could find to watch the arena battles broadcast from the academy, totally oblivious. He couldn’t stop thinking of how much bigger his haul could be. And about how to get the final prize: the prisoners.

“Aaaaand that’ll do it,” Nonon concluded, in much higher spirits than before, “I think that’s about all we can carry.”

“Well, uh, we could carry more with more hands,” Mataro said surreptitiously. Nonon caught his drift.

“You think you can do it?”

“I mean I can give it a try.”

Nonon shrugged. “Whatever. You either have the most charmed fucking luck or you’re secretly a traitor, and that doesn’t seem that likely. Fine, go get the locals out of there.”

Mataro nodded, clenched his jaw in focus. In years prior he probably would’ve gloated, but he knew how deadly serious this was. The thought of the death and horror just kind of rolled off him – again, growing up in Honoujji does that to you – but this, this was something only he could do. And he was killing it.

“Uh-uh-uh, hold up!” Nonon said, “Catch some sleep first. We’ll do it in the dead of night.”

Mataro didn’t want to, but orders were orders. And, although he had a half suspicion that she meant to just let him sleep through the night and miss the chance, Uzu shook him awake a few hours later, and judging by how much cooler the air was it really was the dead of night.

“You really got this? You know they’re right in the middle right?” He asked. Mataro nodded, and Uzu smiled, “Just checking. You’re doing great little dude.” Mataro felt him extend the hilt of one half of his katana out. “Just in case.”

Just in case, right. This time was for real. With a deep breath and a splash of mud over his hair to make sure it didn’t glisten in the light (at first the grime had disgusted him, it was amazing how used to it you got) he descended towards the REVOCS camp one last time. One last precaution – he took one of his “insurance policy” pills and tucked it in the corner of his mouth. Just in case.

“You know,” Uzu said, joining Nonon in a tree from which they could easily leap to the camp if he was in trouble, “We were supposed to have called in to Satsuki by now. What will happen now?”

Nonon looked surprised. She realized that this was the first time Satsuki had come to mind since early that morning. Eventually she shrugged, “Nothing I can do about it. I just need to make sure we don’t all die until we make it to the city.”

“I didn’t think you’d be okay with that.”

She turned to Uzu, “You think I *am*?”

“Well, I don’t – uh, I didn’t think you looked that upset.”

“I’m *trying* to be a good leader!” she snapped, “I’ve got other shit to worry about than what *Satsuki* thinks.” She made a vague gesture towards the rice paddy, wherein Mataro was making his slow and steady way across, somewhere, “This is all fucked up.”

“He’s making it work, though. I dunno, I’m happy. I taught him to do that.”

“Great, good, big whoop for you,” The snark in her voice was biting.

“Alright, now that’s not fair!” Uzu raised his voice, obviously not very much, but the anger crept in, “What are we supposed to do, not pass on what we’ve learned?”

Nonon shook her head. “This thing was supposed to die with us. That was always to plan. We sacrifice so future generations don’t have to. That’s what Satsuki intended.”

Up until that point, she and Saiban had been in agreement and she spoke for both of them. But now... *[This thing?]*

Nonon looked down in alarm. Saiban knew full well what she meant. Something in her memories that he’d always hoped she didn’t really believe anymore.

“I’m sorry,” She sighed to him, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I don’t... What did he say?” Uzu asked, and Seijitsu quietly filled him in. “Oh, I see.”

In the distance Mataro’s silhouette was briefly illuminated between two APCs, then he vanished.

“This is all fucked up,” She concluded, “I guess I never really realized it before, but life-fibers are here to stay, aren’t they? Like, not just in our lives, but forever.” She remembered an exchange between her and Satsuki:

*“The war’s over. This is just a little mop-up.”*

*“If that’s what you think, then I might really start doubting...”*

Nonon hadn’t let her finish, but she understood now what Satsuki had meant. And what she’d meant by her answer when Nonon had asked her what it was she wanted in life:

*“You go, you find out what they’re building, what it does, and you destroy it. Until you do that questions like that are irrelevant, and you won’t be satisfied by the answers either.”*

*[I don’t want to be one of the last Kamui,]* Saiban said *[Do you, Seijitsu?]*

*[No sir!]* She agreed *[There’s so many humans and so few of us. It doesn’t feel right.*

Mataro reappeared on the edge of the town square, right behind the man who’d hit the teenaged prisoner before who was standing guard over them. He dangled Uzu’s sword closer and closer, and then-

There was a lightning quick swipe and the man fell over, his body trailing luminescent life-fibers as Mataro pulled it into the shadows.

That got Saiban’s attention *[Good thing I have such a long range. I’ll call them to me before anyone notices.]*

Nonon had been told about how, since life-fibers were infinitely thin, what you saw of them was not the thread itself but the light it produced. But she’d never seen such an obvious

example of it. They didn't change size at all, didn't look like they were getting any closer, until suddenly they were worming their way into Saiban's body, accepting their new place in the fabric of a larger consciousness. It didn't seem that strange anymore, it was just a part of her life. A part of not just her life, but of Uzu's and just about everyone else she considered herself close to. No, not just of their lives, but – eventually – of everyone's lives. Of human life.

“I get it now.”

“Huh?”

“Life-fibers will conquer the Earth. We aren't fighting to stop them, it's inevitable. We're fighting over *how* they will conquer it. We're fighting to make sure that, when they do, it's by living with humans, not destroying us.”

Mataro was slicing the girl's handcuffs. She held onto his hand, and the hand of the man next to her, and as the whole group linked hands and vanished again into the gloom with Mataro leading them, Uzu looked truly frightened. Only a rare few times in all the years she'd known him had she seen that expression.

“You really think that,” He said, as though his brain failed to wrap around it.

“We're stronger together,” Nonon concluded in a small voice, “Maybe that's how it's supposed to work. I thought we were trying to get rid of them for good, but it's already too late for that, isn't it? I don't want to do that, but I didn't even realize it.”

*[Two halves of the whole. Just like Ryuko said.]*

Nonon smiled up at the stars, “It's just basic biology, I suppose. Symbiosis.”

~~~~~

An hour or so later, back on the ground, and they were as far away from the REVOCS camp as they could get – Mataro had slashed the APCs' tires on the way out and emptied the gas tanks – they were going to notice something he'd done sooner or later so covering some ground before making camp was essential. But he glowed with pride at having done something so big it didn't even seem real – a massive victory without a single death (he'd checked, and to his relief he hadn't killed the man whose uniform he'd sliced off – he knew it would happen but something held him back from killing anyone just yet).

When he'd come back that time Nonon seemed oddly calm. No snark, no abuse. She'd even smiled. It was Uzu who looked a little troubled, but each of the prisoners was carrying some extra supplies as well, so there was only so upset he could be despite having a revelation of cosmic significance dropped on. Especially when Nonon, in a shocking display of permissiveness, even allowed a campfire.

Mataro didn't sit at the campfire though, but grabbed a sleeping bag and curled up immediately. Much as he hated to admit it, he was exhausted. He'd wanted to talk to that girl but, well, language barriers. So what else to but fall asleep, which is what he was trying to do when.

“Hey kid-,” Nonon grunted in his general direction.

“Huh?”

“How old are you again?”

“Sixteen, Lady No-.”

“Ach, y’know what, fuck it. Just call me Nonon, I don’t give a shit.”

“Okay...”

“Just don’t mouth off to me anymore, ya hear? This ain’t a camping trip.”

“I know, I hear ya,” He muttered. And, shockingly, Nonon *smiled* again. And suddenly Mataro understood what Uzu saw in her. He had a clear picture of her features in his mind, glowing in the campfire’s light. It was the kind of smile that smugly said, “*I know something you don’t know, but never you mind, it’s funnier this way,*”. And for the first time that didn’t piss him off.

“You did good out there today,” She said. “By the standards of a Mankanshoku and a dropout, sure, but... good.”

A sleeping bag had never felt so comfortable. And neither had Saiban. He was warmer somehow, softer, closer. Nonon slept free of worries that night.

## Chapter End Notes

In my mind's eye, teenage Mataro looks kind of like Edward Elric - if you were wondering how he's changed as he's gotten older that's the best example off the top of my head. Just, y'know, with chestnut hair and a blindfold like Uzu's.

He is a challenge to write, I've mentioned that before, so if you have any feedback on him in particular please drop it in the comments.

Also I changed the series description to better reflect what this story is really about in the long run, because I feel like it's easy to get lost in the minutia of each individual chapter in what is going to be a long, long, long work. There's a very significant teaser in there and if you figure it out... well I mean it's not like there's a prize or anything, except hopefully getting more hype for where this tale is going.

# Ring of Fire: Rhythm

## Chapter Summary

I added a music track in the text at the place where it's appropriate. It's a little meme-y and comes from a different show instead of the Kill la Kill ost but it's what the music for that scene would sound like if it had a soundtrack.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November 2066

~~~~~

If Nonon had thought that delaying the REVOCS army meant the city of Manado wouldn't be in flames when they got there, she was sadly mistaken. The smoke clouds were on the horizon long before the abandoned villages gave way to abandoned suburbs. Uzu asked their new local friends if they knew what had happened, but all he got was guesswork, they hadn't lived there.

Nonon wasn't too worried about it though, she was still deep in thought about last night's revelation. It was one of those winding contemplations where she couldn't tell where her thoughts ended and Saiban's began, and she liked it that way. The end game now seemed pretty obvious to them – every life-fiber that became part of a bonded Kamui was one less enemy, so they would have to make more Kamui and spread the symbiosis until all humanity was linked to them. And the hybrid project... yes, the future would be converting humanity into hybrids. Kamui weren't fully life-fiber, after all, so why should humanity continue to be fully human?

*Eight billion Ryukos. Terrifying.*

But surely if a war broke out, their combined strength would crack the planet in half, right? Maybe the threat of mutually assured destruction would stop them. Maybe with their immortal bodies they'd go live on other planets and break those instead. Maybe it didn't matter, because it was going to happen either way, and no matter how frightening it was it meant humanity would survive and that was what mattered.

But more importantly than that, when had Satsuki figured this out? Definitely before she'd allowed Ryuko to make the other Kamui, they decided. Maybe right in the wake of their victory over Ragyo. Maybe she'd always known. Maybe that was part of her... fascination with Ryuko. The thought made Nonon shudder, but she couldn't say there wasn't a certain credibility to it.

Shiro had always know, she was sure of that. He'd probably convinced Houka of it too. That all made sense, she'd known him since childhood and never doubted that he had some kind of visionary ability. Even if it did come at a steep cost.

But what about Ryuko? How did she fit into all this? Nonon didn't want to think about that. She still wasn't convinced Ryuko was even herself anymore.

*If you told the real Ryuko all this, she'd flip out. That's how I'll know she's still herself,* Nonon decided. *And if she's not, well, then something will have to be done about that. All the more reason I need to get strong enough to beat her. Just in case.*

When they'd nearly arrived at Manado Nonon broke from her thoughts to climb a tree with Uzu and figure out what the hell was happening in the city. What she saw wasn't difficult to interpret.

Riots. The people who hadn't fled in the face of REVOCS had finally turned on a government so corrupt and inept it had failed to fulfil even its most basic role: keeping them safe.

"So, what do you think of our new base of operations?" Uzu asked.

She smiled at him, "Looks like shit." He grinned back. "Irony, nothing those goobers in the palace could've done about this. REVOCS invading ended their reign, and they never even actually fought them."

"Strength is the only authority down there now," Uzu agreed. They'd both picked out the Mayoral Palace, right where the smoke and the shouting and the pounding aura of bloodshed was worst. Most of the city was low slums and run-down storefronts (in better times Manado had been a tourist destination), so the little downtown around the palace with a couple of derelict high rises was the only place they'd need to go. "Think they'll respect ours?"

"I'd be shocked otherwise. Well, superhero landing?"

"Superhero landing."

Down below in central Manado the conflict that had been spiraling out of control ever since the news of REVOCS landing was now reaching its final phase. Just like revolutionaries before them, the populace had thrown up barricades of rubble and furniture to block the roads, and soon it was impossible for reinforcements to get to the Mayoral Palace. Its lawn was a no man's land, with bodies from both sides watched over by diligent riflemen from inside the shuttered windows, while on the street the mob was camped, noisy but not making any move to attack. They'd tried the back door and the secret escape tunnel but they were choke points, and now nobody wanted to try and go back down them.

Suddenly the air was filled with a rushing noise from above. It only lasted a mere instant before being followed by a crash and a gust of air and a massive splash of mud and grass as two human sized projectiles touched down in the center of the lawn. Silence and settling dust revealed what to the onlookers could only be something sublime inhuman. Glowing with unnatural light, huffing steam, faces shadowed by the light but eyes still blazing. They descended with a halo at their backs. When the mob recognized what had just dropped into their midst, those in front rushed out from the barricades. And bowed.

*Yes, this is what we are now,* Nonon felt such a surge of savage joy she couldn't hold it inside her, and a massive shockwave ripped from her body, followed by one from Uzu. *God, it's amazing.*



She cleared her throat and shouted the Indonesian sentence she'd had Uzu teach her on the way:

**“This city is mine now! I claim it by right as a protector of humanity!”**

~~~~~

Twenty or so minutes later, back in her office in Tokyo, Satsuki's heart jumped with the sort of joy and relief that almost scared her. An unknown number calling her private cell phone could mean only one thing. Ryuko, who hadn't left her side since Nonon had missed the check-in time yesterday, sat up in her chair as Satsuki snatched the phone from her desk.

“Yes?” She asked quickly and, just as quickly Nonon responded.

~ “We're alive. We had a setback, but it's okay! I fixed it.” ~ Nonon, meanwhile, was pacing back and forth in her new office, which had until twenty minutes ago been the local lord's. It was decorated with garish tropical trimming, clearly leaning into the aesthetic of bygone tourist days, but she could put up with that. Out the broad windows she could see the fires beginning to die down, the barricades reversing direction – what had been a siege was transformed into a fortress. Her kingdom was looking pretty good again. Uzu was leaning on the desk, listening, but she didn't need moral support. ~ “And your twerp adopted brother is alive, don't worry.” ~

Satsuki gave Ryuko a nod and watched with a smile as she sunk back into her seat with a huge sigh and put a hand over tired eyes.

~ “Uh, hello?” ~

“Oh, I'm sorry,” Satsuki said with a quiet laugh, “It's just... good to hear from you.” Satsuki didn't care what Nonon thought of her in that moment, it didn't matter. She was alive. Satsuki cleared her throat, “Please, do tell me what has occurred in the time since your last report.”

While Nonon described the run-in with the mystery bomber, the trek through the jungle, Mataro's midnight raid, and the capture of her new city, Ryuko went out into the hall to call Sukuyo and let her know everything was okay. After last night's scare, she was less than fully calmed by Ryuko's reassurances though.

~ “Let me talk to him.” ~

“Mom! I don't really think that kind of thing is allowed.”

~ “Satsuki makes the rules, right? Just ask her and let her work it out.” ~

“Well yeah but I -,” Ryuko cut herself off with a growl of acquiescence, “No, I'm sorry. You're right. It might be a little wait though.”

~ “I've got nowhere to be,” ~ Ryuko could envision her adopted mother on the other end of the line, crossing her arms resolutely. It had been a sleepless night for Sukuyo too, and after all the false reassuring they'd done Ryuko was sure she'd never trust them again. She didn't have to imagine how much worse it had been for Satsuki. Every time she'd woken up that night, stretching a back sore from nestling in an armchair, she'd seen Satsuki still working at her desk – feverishly typing at whatever might keep her mind off it. Her face drawn and pallid in the light from her

computer, skin dry and papery. Ryuko knew what someone past the edge of desperation looked like.

Wasn't there some way she could take some of that pain, offload it onto herself? Reach into her and make her know she felt it too? This wasn't Satsuki's fault. But she'd never accept that.

When Ryuko came back, Satsuki was question Nonon, "He did *what*? That shouldn't be possible."

~ "I *was* surprised by the laziness of the enemy guards. It makes me think they had some kind of device that was supposed to detect intruders that wasn't working properly. But I don't think any of the rest of us could have done it even considering that," ~ Nonon said with clinical detachment.

"Hmm. So, you found him useful after all." Ryuko held up her phone, and when Satsuki saw it she nodded and mouthed "*One moment*".

~ "I'll admit, a pickpocket can come in handy. But we're on good footing now, the people in this city will give us whatever we need."

"Well, you shouldn't need to take from them. Now that I know where you are I will send another flight of dropships with a resupply. Have your wounded ready, we'll send them back home immediately."

~ "I – sure," ~ Nonon cut herself off, deciding that this wasn't very surprising, ~ "When can I expect them?" ~

"Four hours. I've had them on standby since last night, all they needed was somewhere to go."

~ "We'll hold down the fort until then." ~

"Good. When they arrive you should board, link up with Aikuro and Tsumugu, and proceed to the next construction site. Is that acceptable?"

~ "Hold on," ~ Nonon said quickly. ~ "We can't just leave the people here undefended." ~

Satsuki sat up. Since when had Nonon cared about the common people as anything more than a statistic? It was doubly odd because, well, she'd planning on saying the same exact thing, "Of course, you're right. What do you need?"

After some consideration, ~ "A full batallion of DTRs. The newest model. And some additional needle guns to arm the people here. It'll all be useless if the enemy Kamui shows up, but if it's just more troopers looking for slaves, we can't let the whole city be taken." ~

"... That's a big commitment. We'll have to send them by ship, which will take-,"

~ "A day or two, at least, I know." ~

"That pushes our timeframe back on top of the day we've already lost."

~ “Yeah, about that. With your permission, I want to scrap the whole timeframe.” ~

“Because we need to protect the people,” Satsuki filled in where Nonon was heading, nodding in understanding. *Is she doing this to spite me?* Satsuki wondered, *What kind of game is this? I’m the one who’s supposed to be the ideologue now, the one who represents the people.*

~ “Look, the people here literally *just* overthrew the government. They don’t have any weapons that could work on life-fibers, they’re not organized, and I don’t know who’s in the resistance, but I bet you it’s not – what – the *military*? They don’t have one!” ~

“I understand,” Satsuki shrugged it off, concluding that seeing the situation on the ground must have convinced Nonon was needed to be done. “But you have to send us a full schematic of one of these obelisks so that our scientists can figure out what they do. Because they’re building these things everywhere they land – well, except Siberia and California. The local nomads there actually managed to get them lost in the wastelands and forced them to surrender for food and water.”

~ “Wait, seriously?” ~

“Took their life-fibers too, so now the two largest militaries left in the world have access to life-fibers.”

~ “... Huh, guess that makes sense.” ~

“Makes sense? Nonon, it’s very bad.”

~ “Well sure, but it was going to happen eventually right?” ~

Again, Satsuki stopped herself. Okay, how did Nonon know what she was going to say before she said it? Last she’d checked Nonon was still fairly committed to the idea that the Kamui Corps should be the only life-fibers on earth. *She’s either doing this to show me I have nothing useful to tell her, or... or she really believes it now,* “Well... yes. Yes, and there’s good odds REVOCS has already sold some life-fibers to them for funding. So, one thing at a time.”

~ “I agree. So, my army for the schematics?” ~

“If you want it to put it that way, yes. That’s the trade.”

~ “Alright. Anything else?” ~

Ryuko was pointing at her phone quite urgently.

“Actually, there is one thing if you’d please hold.”

“You’re the boss.”

Satsuki took Ryuko’s phone quickly. “Hello Mrs. Mankanshoku,” She said, feeling unworthy of calling her “Mom”.

~ “Oh! Satsuki dear, it’s so good to hear everyone is okay,” ~ Sukuyo said as calmly as she could, ~ “Er, everyone is alive, right?” ~

“Yes, some of the personnel were killed, but everyone you know is alive and well.”

~ “Well that’s a relief.” ~

“I must apologize, Mrs. Mankanshoku. I have let you down. I failed to provide Nonon with sufficient intelligence on our enemy. Your son was endangered by my failings, and I understand if you won’t accept my -,”

~ “- Now hold on!” ~ Nonon suddenly cut in, straining to hear ~ “Satsuki this is my fault”

~

~ “What? Hold on who’s talking I can barely hear you! Hello?” ~

Thinking quickly, Satsuki put both the phones down on the desk and set them to speaker mode

~ “This is Nonon Jakuzure, Mrs. Mankanshoku, calling in to Satsuki to report.” ~

~ “Oh, hello Nonon. Is Mataro there? Can I talk to him?” ~

~ “Yeah, he’s moving into his room now, I’ll send someone to get him. Listen though, I’m sorry I put your boy in danger -,”

“ – Nonon, you don’t -,”

~ “No, Satsuki, I’m serious. I’m the one out here, so it’s my successes *and* my failures. I didn’t anticipate that the enemy would be able to bomb us like that, so whatever you have to say direct it at me. Please.” ~

*Maybe that one defeat really did humble her, Satsuki thought, surprised at how emphatic Nonon was being. And with the humbling... a complete change of mindset? It’s not impossible.*

~ “Oh, well that’s... thank you,” ~ Sukuyo was obvious disarmed by that total admission of guilt. She had been prepared to chew someone out until Ryuko called and told her everything was alright. Now, was she just making a big deal of nothing? Clearly even in what was clear a real war they were actually treating her little boy as number one priority and it hurt all of them to know they’d scared her. ~ “Can I spea- no, I’m sorry, uh... you’re sending someone over to Nonon soon, right Satsuki?” ~

“Yes, we’ll be sending resupply and medical evac within the hour.”

~ “I want Mataro on that plane. I gave this a chance, but I don’t think it’s safe anymore.”

~

“Of course.”

~ “Yeah, sure, I think the kid’s usefulness is about up and -,” Nonon suddenly cut herself off with a gasp, ~ “I just felt our mystery bomber pass by again!”

“Really?”

~ “Felt?” ~ Sukuyo sounded very concerned, but even more confused.

~ “I have the power to feel the presence of life-fibers” ~

“But isn’t it -,”

~ “It’s miles away, don’t worry, it doesn’t know we’re here. Er, Mrs. Mankanshoku don’t worry this has happened before and it doesn’t mean we’re in danger.” ~

~ “Well I don’t know how you expect me to believe that!” ~

~ “Because this time I have a plan to kill that thing. And it only requires me an Uzu, don’t worry.” ~

Satsuki sighed, “Do it, and tell Mataro to call Sukuyo directly this time.”

~ “On it, with your permission.” ~

“Good luck, Nonon,” Satsuki said, and then her cell phone clicked off.

~~~~~

“So, you’ve got a plan?” Uzu shouted as he and Nonon sprinted through the streets and leapt nimbly over rooftops in the direction they’d both felt the object zoom by.

“Kind of! Mostly I figured out how it works!”

“I mean it flies fast, shoots some sort of energy bomb. Probably an Ultima Uniform model, right?”

Nonon shook her head, “Thing is there’s nobody in it, is there?”

“... No, you’re right, it’s some kind of automatic life-fiber drone.”

“And it’s blind. It only found us because the life-fibers started resonating in that particular rhythm.”

“Ahhhh I get it! We lure it in then.”

“Exactly! Only one problem,” Nonon said as they skidded to a halt at the edge of the city where abandoned buildings graded smoothly into the bushes and the bushes graded smoothly into the jungle, “We don’t have enough life-fibers to resonate.”

“Huh,” Uzu scratched his chin thoughtfully as he stopped next to her.

*[No, Nonon that’s not true! We’ve got plenty of life-fibers, right here!]* Saiban said with a flash of realization, urgently twitching his eyes down towards himself.

Nonon gasped, “Just like Ryuko and Senketsu did in our fight! Saiban you’re a genius! Can you do it?”

*[I don’t know, I’ve never tried. Hold on, let me...]* Saiban trailed off as he focused on trying to manipulate his threads, reshape their outer framework into something new. It reminded Nonon of the feeling of trying to wiggle her ears back in grade school, sending commands to a muscle you didn’t know for sure was there, trying to imagine what success would look like.

Except this time, it worked. Bright golden light spilled from the cracks in Saiban as he rearranged himself. His shoulder-plates expanded, widening into swiveling, discs with great wide, flat surfaces lined with concentric rings. Loudspeakers. His normally thin coattails also spread into a broad paddle with a loudspeaker on it. Nonon, who had been scrunching her face in replication of his concentration, jumped when something crept up the sides of her neck and expanded over her ears. A big bulky pair of padded headphones with a sharp, scaly pattern of interlocking plates on the outside.

“Whoa,” Uzu mouthed as the light faded. Nonon inspected the new shape Saiban had taken with a cool, calm expression, as though this was what she had been expecting all along. But inside she was screaming with excitement. She tightened her fist around *Kiba’s* hilt

“Awesome.”

~~***NEW FORM ACQUIRED: SAIBAN HYOSHI (Rhythm)***~~

“Hey Mom.”

~ “Mataro! Thank goodness you’re alright! I heard how far they made you walk – it wasn’t too hard was it?” ~ Sukuyo’s words came out in a quick tumble.

“No it was fine, it was actually kind of cool being in the jungle.”

~ “But they made you sleep on the ground!” ~

“Well, not like there was anywhere else to sleep,” He mumbled, but that answer wasn’t very reassuring so instead he said, “Nah, it was fine. Like camping. We had to do worse before we built the shack in Honnou-town remember?”

~ “Well yeah, but...” ~ Sukuo trailed off rather than finish, “*But you were with me*”

At that moment in the conversation a huge, pulsating noise like an electronic whale call started up from the edge of the city. Mataro recognized that rhythm. Using shingantsu to “see” made looking at the windows pointless, but he held up his hand to glass to fill it better.

*Faith... I have to just believe that what my senses are telling me is true*, he reminded himself

Nonon was standing on a partially caved in rooftop right on the edge of town, and the air warped around her tiny body as that noise blasted from her. But more than just the noise, there was a signal, and imperceptible crackling of the air. Mataro understood what they were doing.

~ “What on Earth is that noise?” ~ Sukuyo said loudly.

“That’s Nonon, trying to lure in the bomber.”

~ “So close?” ~

“No it’s... actually really far away - wow that’s loud.”

~ “This is just what I – Mataro you can’t stay there, it’s too dangerous! You’re coming home on the first flight out!” ~

“Wha – I – but I can’t leave now! Things are just starting to get better!”

~ “Better? Mataro it’s a war, it doesn’t get *better*! Did Honnouji ever get better?” ~

“Well no but – look – last night, I saved like fifty people’s lives! I snuck into the enemy camp and set them free! Nobody else could have done it!”

~ “They let you do **WHAT**.” ~ Mataro could feel the bottom drop from his mother’s voice.

“No – it’s fine, really. They were waiting to rescue me if things went wrong, but they didn’t!”

~ “I don’t want to hear another word until you’re back in Japan, you understand young man? I let Mako jump into danger one too many times and look what happens!” ~

“Mom, I don’t want to go -,”

~ “What did I just say!” ~ Mataro couldn’t tell if Sukuyo was fuming or near tears.

Mataro sighed. It would be so easy to just get on the dropship and return to the comfort of home. But... *What would Ryuko do? What would Satsuki do?*

“No, you know what? I’m not going anywhere! I’m *useful* here, I’m *helping* people and i-it’s because of all the things you always told me not to do! If I didn’t know how to steal those people would be slaves now, and I might be dead of dehydration! And they’re finally starting to see that I’m useful, finally starting to respect me!”

~ “Mataro they’re soldiers! If you want them to respect you, you have to *kill* people!” ~ Sukuyo protested, but suddenly stopped herself and said in a small voice. ~ “Please don’t tell me you’ve already –“~

“What? No of course not!” Mataro spat back, suddenly repulsed by the very thought of having to confess that to his own mother. How could he look her in the eye? *But Ryuko does it just fine.* “But you’re wrong about them -,”

Mataro cut himself off as he felt the mysterious flying object approach and create faint wavering in the glass. He crouched low to the ground, just in case, but kept his hand on the glass so he could feel what was happening on the other side. “Hold on,” He managed to say before.

**“SAIBAN MUBYOSHI!”** Nonon shouted through Saiban’s loudspeakers, unnaturally loud. That was the last sound Mataro, or in fact anyone in the city would hear as right in it’s wake the sound negation field hit. Nonon had known how to make a weak sound negation field using a tuning fork or a knife for a long time, a useful trick for talking privately, but this was totally different. Applying a negating frequency through a Kamui was such a power that it completely undid all sound, all distortion in the air, for miles.

For Mataro he might as well have been struck blind. Desperately he clawed at his blindfold, not taking it off but pulling it so thin over his eyes that he could see the vague outline of what was happening. He was glad he did.

There was the thing itself, hovering now completely still over the city outskirts – it seems without any signal it had gotten confused – and it looked just how Mataro thought it would. A

weird vaguely football shaped white object about the size of a car, eggshell smooth except for the weird pulsating holes in its sides and the exhaust vents on its tail. He didn't get long to appreciate it before a tiny black blur leapt up from beside Nonon – it was Uzu, and as he bounded from the ground Seijitsu's cape stretched into great bat-like wings.

One, two, three wingbeats and the little blur was right beneath the bomber. A silvery flash of sword, and suddenly the two were connected, hurtling back towards the earth where they landed with a puff of dust. Then sound returned and Nonon leapt down to check out the thing that had caused her so much trouble, and Mataro again heard his mother shouting in his ear demanding to know what was going on.

"Hohohoo my god. Mom I'm telling you now, if you want me on that plane you'll have to sedate me," Mataro said with an exhilarated grin. Why the hell would he want to be anywhere else?

~~~~~

When Nonon jumped down from on top of her building she practically pounced on Uzu in excitement, although it was bit clunky because of the huge shoulder spines of their Kamui.

"I fucking knew it! Didn't I tell you that would work!" She said, planting a quickly kiss on the edge of his mouth as she scrambled off his shoulders.

"It never stood a chance. Damn, I've never gone that fast before, like a peregrine falcon! And, uh, you were amazing too, obviously."

"Obviously," Nonon smirked. "C'mon, let's take a look!"

The thing was slowly unfurling where it had landed, in a crater of frayed life-fibers leeching off its sides. Saiban started gathering the loose ones up so they didn't go anywhere – a little treat after such a success. The more it collapsed upon itself the more alien it looked, like a mechanical flower.

"Huh," Nonon observed, "Well, it's exactly how you described it, I guess." She would have correct herself in a moment, though. Something grey and fleshy flopped in the center of it. "What the hell?"

Nonon and Uzu bounded over to inspect the creature, but it didn't seem keen on explaining itself. A thin, clearly emaciated animal that was little more than a long, snake-like shape writhing uselessly on the ground. Scars along its sides showed where limbs had been removed, its skin was too mottled and scaly from neglect to bear any trace of its natural condition, and the face was practically rotted out. It reminded Nonon of nothing more than the horrid, subhuman twisting face of a person trapped within a COVER

"Living fuel for the weapon, I guess," Uzu said, not looking directly at it.

"I-I think I'm gonna be sick," Nonon murmured, and Uzu put an arm around her for support.

The creature gave one, two more flops. And then it was dead.



They boxed up the creature and the life-fiber weapon it had been powering and prepared them to be sent home for Houka and Shiro to study. Seijitsu had been desperately looking forward to absorbing the thing's life-fibers, but now she felt ill even thinking about it. That was wasn't food, it was well past spoiled.

~~~~~

Back in Tokyo, Ryuko and Satsuki were treated to a call from a very, understandably upset Sukuyo, informing them that Mataro had refused to come back.

~ "I don't understand," ~ She concluded, ~ "I-is this just normal teenage behavior? Where did I lose him?" ~

Ryuko hung her head, "We're bad influences on him. I'm so, so sorry."

Satsuki nodded, "Yes, I'm terribly sorry as well."

~ "Oh it's not your fault," ~ Sukuyo sniffed. ~ "You girls are... you're very brave. That's just how you are, and I wouldn't change you. But we can't all be like that." ~

When the call was over, Satsuki rubbed a hand on her temples.

"Some day, huh?" Ryuko murmured.

"And she's the least of my worries. What Nonon asked of me, what we have to do now, it's exactly what I was trying to avoid."

"Well what good are we if we don't protect people, right?"

"That's true, but the intention was never to send an occupying force. A small strike team could have neutralized the threat and been out within a week, but now when this is done we will be the military power in control of the country."

"So? Not like the previous occupants were doing a good job. You'll help them."

Satsuki smiled at her. "You're so sweet. If only the world could be so simple and just. What happens now is we have to either integrate them into Japan or forever treat them like a subjugated people. Do you think either of these options will be easy? Or free from more cruelty and injustice?"

"... Oh," Ryuko stood from her chair, pulled Satsuki back from her desk, and sat down in her lap.

"And you want to know the worst part? There's a part of me that says, 'why stop there?'. That says, 'REVOCS is the perfect opportunity for you to assert a claim to the entire Pacific. Who would resist you?'"

Ryuko looked at her sadly, "I know you aren't listening to that part of you. Forget the old you, right?"

"Yes. But I feel old. It was just three years ago that I dreamed of holding the entire world under my heel if I survived killing Ragyo. The thought was... really all that got me through some of the worst days."

“But isn’t it so much better now? Having the world’s love, instead of fear?”

“It is. So much better. I thought all the cruelty, all those who would have to die would be acceptable sacrifices so long and I got to sit the throne. Because I would be just, and everyone would be in their place. But I didn’t know what justice was. It’s not that simple,” She leaned into Ryuko’s neck, kissed her lightly to feel the warmth, the softness of her skin. The nearness which was, even now, somehow not near enough.

“I do miss the simplicity sometimes though.”

~~~~~

A few hours later revulsion of seeing that thing first hand was forgotten. The resupply dropships had arrived, but now there was something much more pressing. Marching down the road, on foot now, came the REVOCS army Mataro had delayed the day before.

“Hey, what’s your highest killcount in a single day?” Nonon asked Uzu as they watch the column of soldiers approach from a rooftop.

“I dunno, fifty?” He shrugged. “We’re gonna blast through it today, so does it really matter?.”

“Heh, you’re right about that. And plenty of life-fibers too.”

“Gonna try to use your new form? I bet your sound negation would give them all kinds of trouble.”

“Actually, Saiban already has a plan, but he hasn’t told me.”

*[But you’ll tell me, right?]* Seijitsu asked excitedly.

*[So impatient.]* Saiban chided *[Just watch and see]*

Meanwhile, Nonon was looking closely at Uzu’s face, which curved into a smile of serene confidence. Something about this moment made her feel like she should memorize every detail, like a voice was saying *this is special, you’re on top of the world today*.

The army was nearly at the edge of the city now, where the road fed off into the suburbs. They wouldn’t find anybody to terrorize, all the people were up near the palace now.

“What?” Uzu asked innocently.

“Nothin’,” Nonon smirked in response, standing on tiptoe to kiss him. “Let’s go fuck shit up babe.”

Nonon leapt up in a huge arc towards the oncoming soldiers, Uzu right beside her, and as she did so she saw they’d unleashed a pack of hybrid wolf-rats at her. Round one.

And then, right as she was about to land on top of them, a guitar roared to life right in her ears. It was so surprising that she nearly dropped *Kiba*, but in an instant she understood it perfectly.

~~~<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MtOpB5LIUA>~~~

The headphones weren't just to protect her ears. Saiban, understanding her perfectly, was orchestrating his own battle anthem just for them. It didn't surprise her at all that he'd learned how – he was her, after all – but it was amazing. She could feel that he was projecting the pounding rhythm, in time with her heartbeat, out through his speakers, but the full instrumentation was for them alone.

Her own private soundtrack, and when she crashed down onto the first wolf-rat and dismembered it and every slash was a staccato blast of roaring, jazzy trumpet she knew she could never fight another way.

She raced between them to the tune of flutter-tones faster than any human could ever play, slid through their legs to cut them open from the bellies first with sharp licks on the guitar, and then when she saw the charging soldiers and the percussion dropped in and Uzu, picking up the beat and working it into his battle like the master swordsman he was and the blood and life-fibers and harmless bullets became a tidal wave around them she leapt into a full dance.

How could the enemy predict her movements, even with overwhelmingly superior numbers, when she might in mere seconds cartwheel backwards, *Kiba* flashing with each beat and in one smooth movement slaughtering dozens like they were made of tissue paper, then let it drop, still spinning, and bound off Uzu's shoulders to kick a lunging man with a life-fiber machete onto his sword, snatch the knife from him and drop it ever so daintily onto the head of a lieutenant in a *Huskarl* model so it was easily going slow enough to pass through her shield, and then when her uniform shorted out slapping her with her coattail in sync with the beat, liquifying her insides with a blast of bone shattering sound, and only then picking up her still spinning, still slicing *naginata*, twist herself around its hilt and impale a man with it, flipping his body into the air and kicking it into the crowd surrounding her to bowl dozens over?

Most of the REVOCS soldiers were prepared to die for the cause, but even if they had wanted to there was no chance to run. And as for their commander, a blubbery man who was a former REVOCS shareholder and was quickly revealing himself to be much better at lounging on a luxury yacht, munching lobster and watching exotic dancers than leading an army, all he could do was watch as his forces became a whirlwind of blood around the Kamui. And when the whirlwind settled Nonon stood over him with a face flush with savage triumph. He didn't try to fight back as Uzu hoisted him by the collar.

"Talk. Your boss. Where."

The commander spat, "I'd sooner die than tell you, heretic scum!"

"Fine," Nonon grunted.

"wha- wai-," The top of his head was removed from the bottom before he could answer. And Nonon and Uzu stood alone before the crowd of locals who had come to watch, surrounded by a field of death and filled to bursting with power from all the life-fibers their Kamui had absorbed. Maybe the crowd should have been horrified, but they weren't. How could they be? If this wasn't judgement for the sins of their slavers, what was?

In the coming weeks word would spread all across the world that the new Kamui were everything the propaganda claimed and more. Armies were meaningless to them. Call them monsters, angels, whatever, you couldn't argue that they were the new shape of power.

And none more so than The Pink Devil, Nonon Jakuzure, who fought with such grace and agility and sensuous movement that she looked more like she was dancing to music only she could hear and – most disturbing of all, smiled the entire time.

## Chapter End Notes

If you're curious, the next chapter will be focused on Aikuro and Tsumugu and cover what's they've been up to (and will probably be pretty short), then a chapter focussed on Rei, then another Ryuko-Satsuki, then back to Nonon. Now that that initial setback is over the timeframe will also get wider so expect chapters to summarize weeks and months again instead of all being right after each other

# Ring of Fire: Bodyguard

## Chapter Summary

Like many of my chapters this one wound up stretching on longer than I planned. Sometimes that's fine but this one was just supposed to be mostly exposition so I'm not thrilled about that. I'm sure with some editing I could cut it down, but because I try to turn these out at a fast rate most my editing is just typo check (and even that is pretty poor). I'd seriously appreciate some tips on what parts of my writing aren't necessary. Are there descriptions that are too long when you either get it already or I could leave it to your imagination? Are the conversations too drawn out? How could I summarize things better while still making them pop? I'm not a professional fiction writer and I want to get better so if you've got any thoughts drop by the comments section please.

The next Rei one is gonna be a banger though and it should be up this weekend so look out for that. Featuring the return of an OC I bet you haven't thought of in a while

## Chapter Notes

This also seems a fair time to insert the disclaimer that:

This is set in the future some forty years on, and in particular a future in which society has taken a dark turn with the return of hereditary nobility and failure to deal with environmental catastrophe and all that.

THEREFORE THIS IS NOT MEANT TO REPRESENT WHAT THE PLACES I'M FEATURING ARE LIKE TODAY.

I'm doing my best to research locations and cultures, but also combining that with imagining what they might be like in this future. I am not trying to state any position on any modern country or people, not Japan or Indonesia or anywhere else. Except maybe that tyranny and oppression are bad, which I hope most people can agree on.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

November 2066

~~~~~

It was several days after Nonon established her new little kingdom when Aikuro and Tsumugu finally made it to the center of the resistance, the central Sulawesi city of Palu. The trip wasn't quite so desperate as what Nonon had faced, lacking food and water and a roof to sleep under. Travelling with a large and ever-growing group of locals meant that no matter where they went someone knew where to get supplies or how to stay off the main roads, and when they bedded down for the night they were given the best quarters without question. Provided of course they

touched the foreheads of a bunch of little figurines of Ryuko that were thrust at them, more and more every night. Tsumugu grumbled each time, “We shouldn’t be encouraging this.”

“It’s out of our hands,” Aikuro would shrug philosophically, “Might as well humor them.” He assumed they were just a small minority of crackpots, like the black-robed true believers who camped outside Ryuko’s penthouse back in Tokyo.

It was kind of hard to keep that assumption up when they got to Palu and saw, craning up to compete with the skyscrapers, a massive stone statue of The Girl Who Saved the World.

“Holy...” Aikuro trailed off.

“Shit,” Tsumugu finished, looking at him pointedly. “And look how weathered it is. That’s not recent.”

They were led into the city at the head of their caravan and found it ballooned full of people, more than it had ever been intended to support. Barricades and a constant rotation of guards screened every entrance, and temporary camps had been assembled on every street. This was further south than REVOCS had gotten yet on this island, and by virtue of that alone it contained multitudes numbering in the millions. Millions of those black robes and hungry, yearning faces, throwing flower petals to line their path and bowing before them. The rest of their caravan was swept up in the general jubilation, but Aikuro and Tsumugu remained stoic – mostly because it was frankly quite shocking, but also because that seemed to be what the crowds expected of them.

“Man, when Satsuki told us a large portion of the people who lived here were Matoists... I had no idea,” Aikuro murmured, hair blowing loose in the wind, bare chest illuminated by Nekketsu’s purple light like a figure from a renaissance painting. They were standing on top of a pilfered REVOCS APC they had acquired along the way, hastily repainted with some leftovers from a looted hardware store, so nobody would mistake it for the enemy. There had been several skirmishes before they got out ahead of the enemy patrols looking for more slaves, and this wasn’t the only APC they had. Most of the caravan remained on foot but scattered throughout were the stolen vehicles and other cars picked up on the way to transport the old and infirm and the new militia they were putting together on the way, “their boys”.

“You see now,” Tsumugu grunted, “This is what I was saying. We should’ve nipped this in the bud.”

“You gonna try to nip *that* in the bud?” Aikuro nodded at the statue. They were passing now so close that they could see the shocking level of detail on the face. And it was mostly accurate, they could both attest – not too surprising considering this was the most famous face in the world they were talking about here.

Tsumugu wasn’t impressed, “I still don’t like it, and if you or your Kamui had any sense you wouldn’t either. Even less if it’s out of our control.”

[Hey...] Nekketsu huffed, but she was used to this kind of ribbing from Tsumugu by now.

“It doesn’t matter much to me,” Aikuro said, “I mean, maybe one day this be some new world religion, and that’ll be freaky, but for now how would you expect people to act after what happened? This seems completely natural to me. Makes our job easier too.” Their job, they’d all

agreed, was to create a self-sufficient fighting force right here until they linked back up with Nonon. A new Nudist Beach.

“This isn’t what Nudist Beach was about,” Tsumugu shook his head. “ ‘In Heaven’s Stead’ remember?” He quoted part of the Nudist Beach creed, “It’s about humans helping ourselves, not looking for someone to save us. Plus, it’s not so simple. Now we have to play our role in their ritual, that’s as limiting as it is helpful.”

“Huh,” Aikuro nodded thoughtfully. He knew that Nekketsu was able to understand that in his mind she was counted among the humans – human in mind if not body - and for that matter so was Ryuko. “And what do you suppose that is?”

“Not sure, but if she’s their new god... angels? Or demi-gods, more likely.”

“Cool. I call being Hercules.”

Despite himself, Tsumugu chuckled, “It’s not a joking matter. But, for the record, no way you’re Hercules. Maybe Odysseus- you’re good with a bow, on an adventure far from home – but I’m Hercules.”

*[So what does that make me? The lion pelt he wore?]* Reiketsu quipped. Of course Reiketsu had never heard of Hercules before that moment, but she was good at pulling the relevant memories from him. Better, he thought, than any of the other Kamui except maybe Rei’s Furashada.

“One thing I’ll agree though, this is natural. The old gods failed these people, and here we come in their time of need. You’re right, how else would they react?”

They both reached their quarters feeling quite shaken by the whole thing.

~~~~~

Those quarters ended up being a high rise, a hotel the resistance had co-opted as a makeshift base. As it turned out this wasn’t any sort of formal military structure at all, just a bunch of civilians with their survival on the line banding together for defense, so when they offered their expertise the response was “Yes, please, absolutely! In fact, if it will help you work better you can have the top floor all to yourselves just please tell us what to do!” It was such an emphatic plea that even Aikuro’s confidence was a little ruffled, but it didn’t seem like such an impossible task once they’d shaved, showered and brushed their teeth.

*[Do you think it might’ve changed their minds, if they knew how bad their so called ‘demi-gods’ smelled?]* Reiketsu quipped from a hanger next to the shower as Tsumugu wiped the last of the stubble off his now filth-free face.

“I’m shocked honestly that they had my exact kind of razor,” He observed, “I don’t mind being a naked nudist the old fashioned way, but if they’re going to go all out ...” Tsumugu trailed off when he got to the bottom of the bag of toiletries they’d given him and found a can of hair dye, bright red-orange.

Reiketsu took a minute to process it too. She knew what he was thinking. The wings he was dying into his hair were faded from the week of roughing it, but this more subdued hairstyle wasn’t what he was known for, how he was seen in the public conscious.

*[You should do it,] Reiketsu urged, [Play the role.]*

And so when he came out of his bathroom into the common room he and Aikuro had picked to make their base of operation the sides of his scalp were clipped down to size and the middle sported the same mohawk he'd worn for all his years in Nudist Beach. Aikuro nodded in approval when he saw it.

"Finally getting into it, huh?" He asked. Tsumugu shrugged. "Well come on, you've got to admit this is just like the old days, huh?"

Tsumugu didn't answer that directly (not that Aikuro was offended, he was used to how Tsumugu talked) and instead nodded out the window at the statue of Ryuko, "I don't like that."

"What, you got more reasons now?" Aikuro asked, and Tsumugu drew a general circle around a part of it with his hand. As it so happened, they were positioned at about breast level.

"Ahhh, I gotcha. Er, I mean, what's the big deal? She's legal now, right?" Aikuro pivoted quickly from genuine answer to joke, so quickly that Tsumugu turned to him in shock and Nekketsu started yelling in his ear.

*[You shouldn't kid about these things! She's practically family!]*

"What are you - heh, I don't know why I'm even surprised anymore," Tsumugu pivoted too when he saw the shameless grin on his face. "It's still not funny."

"Then why are you smiling?"

"What's funny is that you're a big enough fool to say it."

"See? Just like old times! Y'know, it reminds me of that chick who was in your squad in basic training."

"Oh yes, Naomi, I remember."

"Remember the party we had after the final field exam? When she got so drunk she thought it was all a deep fake and the exam was still going on and -"

"-She threw a beer bottle at me like a grenade, yes, I remember."

"God, how did you put up with us?" Aikuro laughed, "Wonder where she is now?"

"She's actually still one of Aoi's best friends. We had her over for dinner the week before the Kamui attacked."

"You're kidding. And you never introduced me?"

Tsumugu scoffed, "The last time you spoke to her was at that party, and you spilled a drink all over her shirt... Uh, that was an accident, right?"

"I'll never tell!"

"She still can't believe you made it to commander, much less a Kamui wearer. But speaking of, Aoi, I'd better call her and tell her we're alright."



“Oh, for sure, and while you do that I’m gonna call Satsuki, get back in touch with the others.”

And so they did just that, Aikuro got to Satsuki and then she to Nonon and Uzu, and before long the four of them were on video call together and Nonon had given her assembled army the order to move out towards their new location, clearing the path as they went.

~ “In light of the extent to which REVOCS has quickly occupied and subjugated the country I have approved a change of methods. This is no longer a surgical strike but an extended military campaign. The core goals of destroying the Obelisks before they are activated and destroying the enemy army and Kamui remain, but you will now also mobilize local armed forces using our anti-life-fiber weaponry and move them towards a stable local government.” ~ Satsuki’s instructions were clear and logical, but Aikuro’s political instinct protested. It had taken him a while to process that it had only been a week since this had all begun, and the country had descended into anarchy and pulled itself back into a sort of emergency order in that short stretch of time. Almost like this was a long time coming. And it would take a long time to figure out what to do next. Add to that that this was happening all across the Pacific. Just another thing that was out of his hands, and far beyond his qualifications.

Corporate espionage, a game of personalities and powerful figures, that he’d figured out. But shaping the fate of nations, that dealt not in people but the forces that moved them, vast forces that one man couldn’t contend with. Or one man and his Kamui, for that matter.

For her part, Aoi was not impressed by Tsumugu’s report. Satsuki had courtesy called her the first night to make sure she wasn’t in shambles, and instead found her confused as to why Satsuki was even concerned. Surely, she’s allowed her subordinates more autonomy than this at Honoujji, right?

~ “Any new scars?” ~

“No.”

~ “You kill the Kamui yet?” ~

“Not yet.”

~ “Mmm. Well don’t worry, you’ll get there eventually dear.” ~

~~~~~

Not long after that, there was a knock at the door.

“Must be our retainer,” Aikuro nodded. The man who’d been made the erstwhile commander of the city had said he’d send up someone to act as a liaison as soon as he could, “That’s odd, we told the boys to stop him and call us.”

Their “boys” were given the floor beneath them and were quickly fortifying it. Starting from the ten toughest looking backwoods thugs they could find on that first day, to whom Tsumugu grudgingly gave the needle guns he’d been stockpiling in Reiketsu’s unnaturally deep pockets, they’d gradually grown their number. Every time they came upon a REVOCS patrol the high caliber assault rifles their One-Stars used were gathered up, and before long there were more than

enough for anyone who wanted one. And just about every young man did – they’d never dreamed they might take part in something so important.

But that wasn’t all. It was on the second day that they noticed that the bodies and the prisoners from the patrols weren’t just the same shaved-head, dead-eyed hardened cultists. Some of them were locals. And when they’d demanded to know what was going on they were informed that REVOCS recruitment was open – religious conversion nonconditional but probably not genuine – to able bodied men. It wasn’t hard to see why those with loose morals would take the offer, were they really expected to say no to fresh food, water, and not toiling to death on those infernal machines?

But loose morals meant loose both ways, and so the next time they came across a group with local turncoats they killed the real cultists keeping them in line to show they meant business, like clockwork, the turncoats turned right back and fell on their knees begging forgiveness. Of course they weren’t allowed to keep their new Ultima Uniforms, but they did get to keep their lives. And soon the most loyal of “the boys” were geared and ready to go toe to toe with REVOCS. And better still because the Ultima Uniforms were lighter than their old Goku Uniform ancestors, they could be worn under plainclothes and concealed within the crowd.

It had been Aikuro’s idea, but Tsumugu – for so long unwavering in his hatred of all life-fibers – had gone along with it. He’d fought alongside the students of Honoujji, hadn’t he? They were no Kamui, but nor would they turn their wearers against humanity of their own accord.

So, no way the retainer had intimidated his way through.

“Must be a real smooth talker,” Tsumugu concluded as Aikuro went to the door. He stopped, and before Tsumugu could ask why he knew.

The retainer was wearing an Ultima Uniform too.

Aikuro opened the door, and Tsumugu’s expectations were confirmed. The man on the other side, though somewhat short, was the exact kind of smooth, easily confident and naturally skilled warrior who might impress the greenhorns. Slicked back hair, smooth and evenly tanned skin and a good suit with blue embroidery belied the mouth with harsh laugh lines more suggestive of the grimace of combat than a happy smile, challenging, sharp eyes, scars tracing his forehead into his scalp. He was by no means new to combat.

But what Tsumugu hadn’t been expected was the case of beer he had in his hands

“Hello sirs! I am Yuda Uwais, sub-commander of the Palu Defense Force and formal Royal Bodyguard, at your service sirs!” He barked formally in impeccable Japanese.

“Whoa, hold on there. I appreciate the extra effort, but there’s no need for that,” answered in Indonesian. “If you’re gonna be our go-between guy we’re gonna see a lot of each other, and we’ve got enough people falling over their feet.”

Even from over on the couch, Tsumugu could see Yuda visibly sigh with relief. “With your permission, sirs.”

“You have it. In fact, I’m ordering you to speak normally. And, uh, put the drinks on the coffee table over there,” Aikuro said, and Tsumugu nodded in agreement.

Yuda's face cracked with a smile that made those smile lines seem a lot more genuine than Tsumugu had anticipated. "Well then! It's damn good to have you guys here. About time we turn the tide on these assholes, right?"

With the beers open it didn't take long for conversation to get flowing, mostly between Aikuro and his new friend. They hit it off immediately, and Tsumugu had to admit they were quite alike.

"Oh man, I tell you if you want to really see the country just wait 'til we get down to Makassar, assuming it's still standing. Biggest city on the island. I'll show you 'round, got some old friends there from when I was just an apprentice."

"Well, that sounds great – for after we win, of course. Don't have to home right away, right?"

"Naturally, naturally, after we win. Oh, and the girls! I'm sure they'll be all over you, if they're all over me, lowly martial artist... but that's probably nothing different from back home for you, eh?"

"Surprisingly, being an international celebrity isn't as big an asset in the dating game as you'd think," Aikuro said wistfully

"That's because you at least have *some* honor not to make it the core of your personality," Tsumugu said snidely, "As for me, I'm married."

"Oh, word," That seemed to roll over Yuda like a meaningless detail, and he casually disregarded it. "Hey, speaking of, you ever try your luck with that one?" He motioned to the statue of Ryuko. "Kinda intimidating, a chick who can turn you to dust with a flick of her fingers. Er, can she really do that?"

*[Oh yes, exactly like Aikuro,]* Reiketsu chuckled in Tsumugu's ear.

But Aikuro actually shook his head disapprovingly, "You shouldn't call her that. At least, not around us."

"I – shoot, I'm sorry. It's just talking like that's blasphemy around here, I got too relaxed."

"Blasphemy? No, it's just she's a..."

"Practically family," Tsumugu finished that thought. "Interesting choice of words there, blasphemy."

"Well, that's what it is! Hold on, you don't know how crazy things are around here, huh?"

"No, but I had a feeling," Tsumugu said, "A feeling you were picked for our retainer because you were one of the few who wasn't part of their new religion."

"You got that right."

Tsumugu leaned in thoughtfully, "Tell me more." He knew that they had to get a feel for what was really going on around here, and Yuda's job wasn't just to bring them things they needed but to tell them what they needed to know too.

Yuda blew out a big sigh as he began, “Hell, they’ve been at it ever since, y’know, the whole... thing. And I get it, I guess, does make you wonder what it all means. But not like they’ve got it figured out either, they might all look uniform but they don’t agree on shit. Some of ‘em used to be Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, so they try and fit her into their ideas. But still, in the new hierarchy you gotta believe that Matoi’s either a god or daughter of god to be part of the resistance.”

“... And what do you believe?”

“Well... what is she?”

“Just an ordinary girl with the bad luck to become a science experiment moments after she was born.”

Yuda seemed relieved by that, “Sounds good to me. Nah, I’m just the exception because I’m good at what I do, makes me useful to have around.”

Aikuro said, “Well, good enough to snatch an Ultima Uniform, eh?”

Yuda’s face fell, “How do you know about that?”

“You see these Kamui? They’re more than just weapons. They’ve been able to sense the presence of the life-fibers on your body since the moment you came in here.”

“No shit,” Yuda sounded worried.

“I mean, it’s fine. Some of our boys have ‘em too. How’d you manage it though?”

“Ahh just a simple rope snare. Probably don’t have to tell you guys, but they’re *really* dumb. We’ve gotten like ten of ‘em that way.”

“Heh, that’s true,” Tsumugu nodded, “So, good enough for the resistance, good enough for the Royal Family too. Where do they figure in all this?”

“Well, ah, we were fleeing New Jakarta after the REVOCS attack, and then, well, I guess the crowds figured out who they were fleeing alongside. The kids are alive, at least.”

Tsumugu’s eyes narrowed, “I see. Former bodyguard indeed.”

“I saw the way the winds were blowing,” Yuda seemed nonchalant, but Tsumugu could tell there was some tension, worry that he was being judged. “Don’t tell me you would’ve done anything different. They were tyrants, like your Kiryuins. ‘Cept they didn’t even dress the part. No, I never really believed in them, trust me.”

“Huh. I’m sure I would’ve. Wouldn’t’ve been so gung-ho about it though.”

“Oh, I know. You’re the guy who keeps this guy in line,” he pointed to Aikuro, “Your reputation precedes you.”

“Hey now, that’s a little unfai-,”

“-No, that sounds right to me,” Tsumugu said with a chuckle. He’d gotten the measure of this guy now. Not totally slime, not totally honorable either. Yes, he could work with that. He’d

gotten the measure of him in every way but one. “So, you don’t believe in Ryuko, or the recently deceased monarchy, what do you believe in?”

“My fists. My guns. This new uniform. And killing those fuckers who’re ransacking my home. How’s that do for ya?”

“That’s good, but you’ve got them in the wrong order. Your fists will do you much better than an Ultima Uniform, once you know how to use them.”

“He’s right,” Aikuro agreed.

Yuda looked perplexed, “Are you suggesting you can beat life-fibers with your bare hands?”

“Tell me, what martial arts do you know?” Tsumugu asked.

“Well Silat, Krav Maga, Judo, Kung Fu, Aikido, few others besides.”

“A good foundation, but I see the newest innovation hasn’t yet reached you. With the martial arts of nudist beach, you’ll be able to fight anything short of a Kamui and win.”

Yuda grinned, “Well, if you think so. I’ve never heard of something like that myself.”

Aikuro sprung to his feet. “Oh shit, is it time to throw down? I knew you couldn’t resist Tsumugu! Well, c’mon, let’s take one of these empty hotel rooms and clear out a dojo.”

Whatever Yuda may have expected, he quickly found out just how formidable Nudist Beach techniques were. When Tsumugu shed Reiketsu and propped her up by the wall he thought he’d have to pull his punches, but despite managing to meet Tsumugu’s own expectations he was the one on the ground every time. It may have been a distraction, and they may not have had everything ready by the time Nonon arrived to join back up with them that night, but they’d gained something valuable that day.

One day, when the time came to expand the Kamui Corps, Yuda Uwais would join their number.

## Chapter End Notes

Yuda is based on the Indonesian martial arts actor Iko Uwais btw. I like the idea that he's Iko's descendant, but the naming conventions in Indonesia aren't that simple so maybe not who knows.

# Rei's Interview

## Chapter Summary

I've been looking forward to writing this one for a while. Hope you enjoy!

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 2066

~~~~~

Satsuki's prediction of an extended campaign turned out to be exactly right. More than a month now, and the news kept coming in of steady march, attack and counterattack, more cities brought into the fold of the defenders of humanity, more battles, more bloodshed. Nonon and Aikuro encountered the enemy Kamui on the slopes of Puncak Jaya – it ended in a draw, but not before half the mountain was blown off and all the trees for miles around were levelled. They took more obelisks, and ran into more of those strange stealth bombers fueled by the life force of horrifically mutilated creatures (Shiro and Houka had worked out that the creatures were dolphins, but the significance of this had not yet dawned on them), but now they knew how to deal with them. There wouldn't be any more horrific losses, just the sort of plodding give-and-take that a war spread out across tropical islands would inevitably become.

At least the requests for more soldiers had become requests for more gear – the Indonesians themselves were turning out ready for the task, all prior petty differences set aside to protect their homes – so Satsuki's promise that Kamui would keep the majority of Japanese soldiers out of harm's way was coming to fruition. Still, what Satsuki had once hoped would be a quick strike turned into a protracted slog.

Not that Rei minded at all. The longer it went on like this, the longer REVOCS would keep infiltrating Japan terror attacks to keep the rest of them busy, so that the war wouldn't expand across the entire Pacific. It was nice to know they feared them, feared that if all eight enemy Kamui were on the attack they wouldn't last a week. And it was nice to take a few more life-fibers each day, to feel Furashada expanding and becoming stronger. But more than that, it was very, very nice to be out there every day, saving people's lives and being applauded as a hero.

And with half the Kamui away and Houka and Shiro preoccupied with science stuff half the time it was just her and Ira running around, jetting all across the country, sometimes multiple attacks a day. Ira was neutral on that, at least he got to spend more time with Mako since she was taking time off from school to practice her talent agent skills on him, keeping him hydrated, keeping dust and blood off his Kamui, keeping the press at a safe distance until it was time for photo-ops. Rei didn't need an agent, having to talk to someone would slow her down. She lived for this now.

How had she let herself be persuaded to take up such boring bureaucratic work before? Sure, she had a talent for it, but what did that matter compared to what she had now. Her mind was so full of a constant stream of obsessive thought about battle, how to handle different kinds of enemies, different kinds of delicate hostage situations. Hers and Furashada's, and soon they were so in sync that it wasn't possible to really tell where one ended and the other began, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

Plus, with their attention constantly on the fight at hand, there was not time to think about Ryuko.

But even that paled in comparison to just the sheer joy of seeing people's faces when she saved them. The pure, pure happiness – she'd felt happiness like that before, and now it was like she got to experience what she'd gone through being rehabilitated with each and every one of them. And she got to do it every damn day.

~~~~~

It was one of those ordinary days and Rei was up against some kind of hybrid monster about the size of a tyrannosaurus – all greasy fur and bristles and teeth, she couldn't even tell what it had been before. She was on the outskirts of Tokyo today for this one, just a warmup, just a monster turned loose to ruin a suburban neighborhood. The monster couldn't recognize it yet, but its path of destruction was about to come to an abrupt end. She and Furashada were hurtling through the air in an arc so broad and fast it looked like a straight line, axe high above their heads, when Rei spotted something unusual.

Standing on the rubble of a house next to them was a wisp thin young woman with long brown hair, her face obscured by a gigantic high-shutter camera.

*Little too close,* They registered in unison as they closed the final distance, *have to keep an eye on her.*

The blade sunk right into the monster's rumpled forehead with a solid *thunk* feeling, then a crunchier scraping Rei recognized as thick bone. She clicked the button on her axe's hilt that disconnected one side of the double-blades for cross-cutting, sprung off a leathery nose to dodge a huge paw and zipped off into the rubble for another angle of attack. Big monsters like this were fun because you could run circles around them, wear them down at your leisure. Sort of like carving a pumpkin, or at least what she imagined carving a pumpkin might be like, not having had the sort of childhood conducive to it.

The girl crouched down, trying to get a better shot, and Rei saw an electric scooter parked behind her that pricked a memory. *Seen her before. At other fights,* Rei and Furashada thought. There were quite a few journalists who made their business following in their wake. Rei took some pride in that she was considered the most sought after – apparently pictures of her in motion were very dynamic, whatever that was supposed to mean.

This time she darted through a shed (turning it into a pile of scattered wood on the way) to slice at the creature's Achilles tendon. It howled in pain as she hit it with both blades in a clean crosscut. Thus crippled and confused she easily jumped onto its back and, reconnecting her axe so she could grab onto the mane of striped bristles and yank it as hard as she could, flipping the monster all the way over her head –

-Right onto the girl, Rei realized in that briefest of instants only a Kamui could react to in which it was still twisting through the air. Her heart nearly stopped, and if Furashada had one it would have too.

*Stupid idiot!* They raged, but they were already moving. From the girl's perspective Rei was suddenly right next to her, axe held above her head, and then equally suddenly that axe was all that was between her and a ceiling of flesh.

"What the!" She yelped, but Rei didn't acknowledge her. Two things happened at that same too-fast-for-human-eyes rate: A spray of wine-colored globs of blood sprinkled out onto them, and then Rei pushed off the ground and carried the monster high into the air, carving into it as they fell together. The force from her leap was so strong that the pile of rubble the girl was standing on was flattened right to the ground. To her credit though she kept a death grip on her camera and she and it survived unscathed.

The fight was over in seconds after that, the hybrid sprawled in a decapitated heap. Rei leapt over to that pile of rubble, revved up to give the foolish "Kamui Chaser" a lengthy safety lecture. She knew it had technically been her that had hurled the monster, and she would have blamed herself if it had landed, but since it hadn't there was time to think about how this situation shouldn't have happened in the first place.

It took her a bit off guard to find the girl still reeling, staring forlornly at the pile of scrap metal that had been her only form of transportation.

"Are you alright?"

"My bike..." She whined quietly.

Rei sighed, "File a claim with the Office of Public Welfare and Safety. You should receive a reimbursement with six to eight business days," Rei rattled off before processing what she was saying, "Actually no, forget about the bike! You could have been killed!" She got up in the girl's face (fortunately she was also quite short so Rei didn't have to rely entirely on the Kamui's aura of power to intimidate), "What were you thinking!"

The girl turned perpetually tired eyes towards the ground shamefully. "I don't know... I'm sorry milady."

Rei was no good at this. She was too relieved she'd gotten there in time to be truly upset. Plus, there was an obvious sincerity about this girl that was immediately likeable. How could she yell at a fan? She sighed again, relenting, "You're a Kamui Chaser, right? You're going to sell that video to the highest bidding news station, right?"

By Rei's guess she must have fitted her bike with a stolen police radio to beat the rest of the media to so many of her past attacks – Furashada was pretty sure she'd been at every one of the near-Tokyo battles in the last few weeks. With such dedication something like this was inevitable, and it was a good thing she'd been fast enough – a few other Kamui Chasers had lost limbs or been hospitalized, but none were dead yet.

"Yes milady," she murmured, eyes still down. Rei and Furashada's pity went out that someone so young and frail would be forced into such a risky business. It didn't even pay very well.



“Look, I have nothing against your line of work, but you won’t see anything for it if you’re dead, will you?” She asked more gently.

“No...”

“Then have a care, please. I might not be so fast next time,” She turned to go with that final warning.

“Wait!” The girl shouted; a bit shocked that Rei was going so soon. Her confidence seemed to waver a little when Rei turned back around, but she persisted, “C-can I interview you? Please?”

Unexpected. “I’m sorry, but I don’t give interviews. Good luck with your footage, I’m sure today’s will sell well.”

“Please! It could be my big break! This camera and... the bike, they’re my whole life’s savings!”

Also unexpected. People got into this risky line of work because they happened to have a good camera left to them from before they were down on their luck. And regular old superfans just bought figurines. It was intriguing.

But Rei still shook her head, “It’s my policy. If I let you, then people and shows will start asking why not them, and what will I say? It’s not going to happen.”

By now the shocked inhabitants and trucks full of more official reporters, as well as a cleanup crew, were on scene, and Rei took a moment for a photo op before her dropship returned for her. No surprise, as soon as she boarded she was informed there was another attack she needed to handle, and neither she nor Furashada thought of the Kamui Chaser with the tired eyes for the rest of the day.

~~~~~

But the next day she was back, this time late. Rei saw her hurriedly rushing from a taxi just as the last of the surviving cultists were being taken prisoner and packed up. This time she didn’t hesitate, walking directly at Rei as soon as she spotted her. Evidently whatever barrier of fear had kept her from doing this already had fallen, but not entirely – her fists were tightly clenched as though this was very difficult.

She was there the day after too. And the day after. And the day after that. And by the next week she was there early again, on a new bike of the same make and model as her original. And by this point it was hard to ignore her.

“Please,” She’d say, “It’s not just for sale, I don’t have to publish it right away.”

“I’m not going to debate this with you. I’m sorry. The answer is still no.”

But they couldn’t stop thinking about it. Obvious engaging with creepy stalkers was no good, but that wasn’t what they thought they were seeing here. The girl was too respectful, too courteous. Desperate seeming, sure, but when Rei said no that was no, at least for that day. And when she asked Ira about it, he said that sure he’d seen her, but she’d never come to talk to him. They weren’t sure what to make of that. And then Mako added that she hadn’t seen her, and Ira

that yes, oddly, it did seem that she left as soon as Mako arrived on the scene. They weren't sure what to make of that either.

But it stuck with Rei and Furashada. A desperate girl who just needed one touch from fame to lift her up. For some reason, they trusted this girl to interview her well – if not with skill, at least with clever questions. What reason did she have to say no? In fact, that sounded very familiar to Rei. And the more she thought of it, the more she thought of Ryuko... if Ryuko hadn't found her, lifted her up, introduced her to her family that had become the Kamui Corps she'd have still just been a stale bureaucratic toady for Satsuki. She remembered how awestruck she'd been, not just by her beauty, her smile, but how down-to-earth and honest she was.

*We could be like that for this girl. But not a letdown at the end.*

And so, the next day Rei didn't wait for her chaser to come storming along. Instead, the moment she spotted her she jumped into action, appearing before the girl with a gust of wind and dust.

"I've changed my mind. You'll find a car waiting just past the reporters' trucks to take you to our complex. You will be screened by security on the way, if you do not meet their standards you will be taken to your home instead."

"You mean?"

"Yes," Rei smiled, pleased by how shocked the girl was, "I hope you've prepared some good questions."

"Oh yeah, yeah totally. I-I just-,"

"-If you need some time to prepare, we can take you to your home first," Rei said cordially. "Or reschedule for tomorrow."

"No! No I'm ready!" She all but fell to her knees in eagerness, trying to deconstruct her camera and return it to its satchel as quickly as she could.

Rei put a hand on her shoulder and she froze like she'd been shocked, "Then I'll see you there. And don't worry, okay? I'm just curious what you want to know."

~~~~~

The cafeteria of the Research Complex had private conference rooms in which meetings could be held over lunch and a pleasant view of the grounds, and this was where Rei chose to bring her interviewer. The girl was practically bouncing with excitement as they sat down, but despite that she held back from launching into her questions for Rei to exchange the expected pleasantries. And by the time that was over lunch had arrived, and so it was fifteen or so minutes before anything resembling an interview began.

"You can start now, if you want," Rei said cordially, about halfway through her bowl of ramen. A big bowl, Kamui drained a lot of energy, and lately as Rei and Furashada had been in such constant action he seemed to require even more. "You seem anxious to start."

"Oh no, no I'm fine – it's not for my sake I'm anxious to start. You're just very busy is all, I know."

“Eh, this is my break anyway. But you’ve worked very hard to be here, so please, whenever you’re ready.”

She was ready, and without further ado she launched into it.

The first series of questions were just about her life in general, it was pretty clear that she was looking to make a full profile of Rei, systematic in a way that suggested she might hope to do one for each of the Kamui wearers. Rei answered these without getting very specific, because she wasn’t about to go spilling what had taken her psychiatrist months to access to a stranger, but it was nice to at least have this authoritative record out there. She was the most mysterious of the Kamui Corps, and despite being a fan favorite rumors swirled about her life. All most people knew was that she used to work for Ragyo but had been redeemed, and their imaginations ran wild from there.

Although she wouldn’t get too specific, Rei did give indulge her with some new details: “Lots of people don’t know this, but I was actually Ragyo’s personal secretary.”

Her interviewer gasped, “No!”

“It’s true. Ever since she picked me up, she’d always trained me with that as her plan. I went through... most of the same combat and endurance training Satsuki did. If we were going to be her most vital tools we had to be the best tools we could be. But Satsuki got more experience with leading troops, commanding directly. Ragyo, at least in front of me, look down on that stuff. To her the true privilege was being the puppet master, the spider. And I thought - even though she never shared her plans with me - I thought I was part of that.”

“Wait, you mean you thought – er, you were above Satsuki?”

“No, thought is the right word – I wasn’t above Satsuki, she at least had freedom to control Honoujji and her other projects. But she told me ‘the life-fibers have chosen you for something special’ and I believed her. And I – look,” Trying to explain this all felt very surreal, and the mounting worry was that people would wonder how she had been fooled so easily, “Look, you have to understand there wasn’t really any option but to believe her. Not just because she’d kill you, but because it seemed true. Living in her palace you had just all this... this wealth and power shoved in your face. And then Ragyo herself, it was like being in the presence of a goddess, you couldn’t deny her. Satsuki was lucky, really, that everything she did was treated as a disappointment or a mild amusement. She probably would’ve been found out years ago. It really was Ragyo’s hubris that ruined her there.”

Her interviewer nodded, looking up from her notebook where she’d been scribbling frantically. When Rei leaned over she saw that in addition to a transcript of what she was saying there was an loose sketch of her, looking thoughtfully into her now mostly finished bowl of ramen. “C-can you go more into that? Why would Ragyo think Satsuki was a disappointment? I mean, she’s *Satsuki*.”

Rei chuckled, “Oh, who can know for sure? She was so far above me I never dared wonder. But looking back on it... Ragyo had never been interested in her, not after the first year or so. I was very young then though, so I don’t remember much myself. But that was when she tried to turn Satsuki into a hybrid, but it failed. And then later Ryuko-,” Rei hesitated for a moment before deciding that since the rest of the world didn’t know Ryuko’s true parentage this wasn’t the time to drop that bombshell, “Ryuko was made in the REVOCS labs, but her father faked her death and went into hiding. I think Ragyo just... wanted an immortal daughter like her, I guess. No idea why that mattered to her, not like she ever really loved anybody, but she finally succeeded with

Nui. Also lab grown like Ryuko, you understand, and I'm sure Ragyo was disappointed it wasn't her own flesh and blood. But Nui would do just fine.”

“And did that cause any jealousy?”

“Ohh like you wouldn’t believe. I tried to fit her into that same role Ragyo filled – too far above human to ever be touched – that’s what everyone else did. But she was *such* a brat, no majesty, none of that Kiryuin shine. At the time I just couldn’t stop thinking ‘why, why does she love Nui more than me?’ But it’s a good thing in the end, because she’s dead and, well, here I am. Er, are you getting all this?” Judging by how frantically she was writing Rei was worried the girl was falling behind.

“Uh-huh! Thank you so much – this is great. I-I’m sure it’s hard to talk about.”

“Not that much, really. Everything before I bonded to Furashada, especially stuff that far back, it’s really surreal remembering it. I was a totally different person then. I feel like I was only seeing half the full picture, without him to discuss with.”

“I see. That actually ties into my next question which is how do you think integrating into the Kamui Corps has been? I mean, they’ve been very close for years, and you used to be the enemy.”

“Well, they definitely don’t see me as an enemy. They’re all big fans of second chances, really. But at first when I was first back in Japan they didn’t really pay me any mind. I mean, I was just an acquaintance to them, and I think they were afraid I’d be touchy about everything that had happened to me. I don’t blame them for that.”

“Right, naturally.”

“But I think it was really dating Ryuko that really brought me into their circle and reintroduced me to them.”

The girl sat up quite abruptly, and Rei frowned, “I’m not gonna tell you why we’re... on a break, you understand.”

“Yeah, yeah I know.”

“But I’m here to tell you about my life, so I will talk about her. Just no tabloid stuff, okay? Now please, go on.”

Taking a moment to compose herself, the interviewer went on, “I have another question about the Kamui Corps, if that’s okay.”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Ahh... so, a lot of the public view of the Kamui Corps is that the culture is very... uh... party heavy. Is-is that fair?” She seemed very nervous to offer up what could be construed as a criticism. “I mean, even Satsuki was spotted at a bar with Ryuko and Nonon a couple times.”

This actually took Rei about by surprise. She had no idea they were perceived that way, but now that it was out there she understood it. “Huh. I mean I suppose so. I mean, we all drink,

and we're all pretty close and like to spend time together – heh, well except Shiro,” Rei said thoughtfully, “But it’s not enough to make us out of shape or anything.”

“Oh no, I don’t mean it’s a *problem*.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. But seriously, if people feel that way, I want to reassure them. It’s true what I said, I think we all like to cut loose a little. Except Satsuki, I think she’d appreciate me saying that she spends time with her friends but doesn’t cut loose,” Again, no tabloid shit. Whatever she felt Rei wasn’t going to badmouth someone who was both alive and not a total monster. “But I think they’ve earned it, no? I mean Aikuro and Tsumugu are both older, sure, but the rest of them are still just barely twenty and they haven’t really had a chance to act that age. All their teenage years were consumed by Honoujji. But I think now that we have REVOCS to deal with that doesn’t happen anymore. Honestly, we all would rather be training. Fighting with our Kamui, well, it’s amazing. Especially going up against each other – I’m not too big on dueling so much – but for most of them it’s the only real challenge. So for now I think you don’t have to worry about anything irresponsible from us. But when we win I’m sure there’s going to be one hell of a party.”

“That is reassuring, to me at least. I’m sure everyone trusts you all though. Uh, how do you think *you* fit into this then?”

“Honestly I used to not understand it. Cuz you see part of serving Ragyo as a ‘puppet master’ was attending these high-class balls, and that was work, not fun. You had to learn to wind drunk people around your finger, keep your thoughts together when there’s a lot of alcohol and drugs in your system. So, I didn’t think I’d ever have fun with that. But Ryuko changed all that.”

Again, the girl sat up, “How so?”

“Well, the first time we met it was at a Kiryuin Foundation holiday party. I wasn’t really sure if I would have a good time there, but I dressed up, had a couple drinks just in case. And then I – literally – bumped into her. She didn’t recognize me, but I recognized her immediately. And I thought ‘I shouldn’t’ but she didn’t really leave an opening for that. It was like to me saying ‘I shouldn’t’ she was saying ‘shouldn’t what? we’re just talking’. So I... honestly I just turned my brain off, and I found myself at her home. I thought, y’know, what’s the harm?”

“Can’t blame you,” The girl smiled shyly, “She is amazing, isn’t she?”

“Y’know... yeah,” Rei said wistfully, remembering that night. How wonderful, the way Ryuko had looked at her. Not the sort of rapacious hunger she knew from Ragyo. Deep and full of vibrant humor, but still – still, she couldn’t keep them off her. Normal people shouldn’t be so drawn to look, so unabashedly open with desire, but she was. Nobody had ever looked at her like that before.

“And then the next day, I gave her my number as I was leaving, but she didn’t say anything except, y’know, that she’d had fun. So I thought that was that until the next day, she texted me. And I was just shocked. I just thought there was no way, I wanted to ask her why. I was so much older, I was sure there were plenty of interested girls at college, and besides,” *I’d been the slave of her evil mother who did horrible things to both of us – nope, can’t say that!*. “Besides, I’d been her enemy so recently. I really thought she would come to her senses and realize how awkward this all was. I wanted to ask her why, but what she texted told me the whole story: ‘I can’t stop thinking of you’. Of course she didn’t care about any of that, and really I decided I had to see her again right then. She wanted to see me – for me.”

Rei's interviewer had been smiling broadly listening to this, the first really confident smile that she'd worn since Rei first met her. Rei and Furashada concluded that this must've been what she really wanted to hear about the whole time.

"Well," Rei sighed, "I've never told anyone that before. I think that'll get some good numbers for you, huh?"

"Oh totally! That's great! But, uh, what happened next?"

"I suppose I can't leave a story unfinished, can I? So, after that the next thing I knew she tells me to wear something nice, but don't worry about my hair. So I'm confused, but sure, and soon enough there she is on a motorcycle! Which I never thought I would have much interest in either but right then I thought she looked like she was having so much fun. And – I know there's whole online communities dedicated to what the best Ryuko look is – but I'll tell you as someone who dated her, it's black leather jacket, skinny jeans, and hair up so you can see the red. No question."

Rei went on, lost in the nostalgia, "Oh, and then she took me to this bar, nightclub, whatever, a place she goes really often. Mostly college kids, kind of a below street level, seedy kind of place. And I was nervous, because I thought that I'd given her the impression that I more worldly, more into that kind of scene than I was. But she introduces me to her friends, and they're all very welcoming, doesn't feel at all like – y'know that sort of pressure that you feel when there's two people who've just started dating? Where people aren't sure what they can ask? None of that," Rei chuckled, "In retrospect, probably a sign they'd been introduced to a lot of girls by Ryuko. But then she took me over to the bar and ordered and suddenly I had this problem: No idea what to order. But Ryuko took one look at me and turned to the bartender and said, 'make that two', and I was set. She looked so proud giving me that drink, especially because I liked it. But to this day I'm not sure if she knows that I'm not really into that. That I'm not really that kind of girl. I dunno."

The interviewer didn't seem interested in stopping her flow (in fact she wasn't writing anymore, just listening), so she went on, "And that was how things went for the first few weeks. We'd go out in the evenings, I'd wake up at her place, and eventually I just stopped going back to my apartment. This was before we decided we were actually dating too. So I thought we were just fooling around, so I didn't want to tell her that I was... really, uh, really falling for her, I guess. Because she didn't really feel that way about me. She was just very suave and cool and liked pretty girls I thought. But then there was one night when I had to work really late. I figured she'd probably already be asleep, but I checked my phone as I was going home and there were just dozens of texts and missed calls from her. So I went there, and I found her... in pieces. Bed all a mess, pacing back and forth, yelling at me: 'why didn't you tell me! I was worried about you!'. And that's when I knew it wasn't just me who'd fallen."

Rei went on a little more, recollecting about all those memories. Sure, there were some rough times, but the others were better than she'd remembered. And she and Furashada started to think, *maybe what didn't work between us was that she never really understood me. Of course, she'd understand Satsuki – they're the same in so many ways. But she didn't know me, not really.*

But by now they'd notice that the girl was taking notes, and Rei leaned over to take a look at her sketchbook. All that was on this page was a drawing of Ryuko.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was again?"

“Huh? I-I’m sorry?”

“It seems to have escaped me.”

“It’s Haruka. Haruka Naganohara.”

Suddenly everything made sense to Rei. She sat back in her chair. “You’re Ryuko’s ex, aren’t you?”

“Yes milady,” Haruka hung her head in shame.

“So, what’s this all about then? Were you planning on telling me? Be honest, you know I can shred that sketchbook and send you home empty handed before you can even react.”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Haruka said in a small voice, “Or you’d never hear me out.”

“Well, you’ve got that right. So, you clearly just want to hear about Ryuko. Why? Wouldn’t it be better if you just moved on?”

“That’s not true! All of this is really, really good,” She clutched her sketchbook to her chest. “I wanted to talk to *you*. Please believe me.”

Haruka sounded emphatic, so Rei let it slide, “I thought she said you were an artist. What happened to that? Come to think of it, she *also* mentioned that you are one of those crazies who thinks she’s some kind of god. You are, aren’t you?”

“No! That’s not true!” Haruka cringed, but not as much as Rei expected. She must’ve known she’d be figured out eventually. Maybe she even hoped for it. It took guts, Rei and Furashada had to admit that. And if her reasoning was good enough, maybe she’d let this slide. Maybe. “At least, not anymore.”

“Then tell me. Come on, calm down. You must have some good reason for all this, if you gave up on that and spent all your money on a fancy camera. I won’t kick you out, alright?” Rei decided to take a softer tact.

“Alright. So look. I used to be a mangaka – artist, yeah – and then I used to believe Ryuko was some kind of angel or something like that. But when she went on TV and told everyone what she really was, I listened. I know a lot of people didn’t, but I did.”

“Lucky you. So what next, why’d you decide to give up art too?”

“I didn’t give anything up. What I want to do isn’t just draw, I want to tell stories. And I was thinking after Ryuko revealed that she wasn’t any kind of anything more than a lucky human that it didn’t change that she was in the middle of something very important. Something that’s never happened before in history. And I decided that that was the story I was going to tell. And I thought since you’re the most popular and the one who’s always around you’d be a good place to start. A-and I mean, you probably know the person at the center of this better than almost anyone!” Haruka, for the first time, had a light in her tired eyes. Her fervor about this was obvious.

*She’s been let down by Ryuko too.*

“That’s... not a bad idea. Good answer,” Rei concluded after some thought. “You really gave up everything to do this? What will you do if this doesn’t work out?”

“It will work out! It has to. I haven’t even told my parents I dropped out. I don’t know what they’d say.”

“Well then I’d better let you keep that sketchbook,” Rei smiled, realizing now more than ever she had that chance to be a golden opportunity for this young woman. “I’ll even give you my personal seal so there’s no question it’s authentic. Good luck.”

Haruka beamed. “You can do that! I-I don’t know what to say!”

“That you’ll succeed,” Rei stood to shake her hand, “I’m sorry I blew you off so quickly, Haruka. You’re... a much smarter girl than I expected.”

Haruka blushed.

“But I have to ask,” Rei went on, “You don’t feel jealous of me at all, right? I mean, if you really cared for Ryuko I understand if you do.”

“Oh no! No, I think I always knew Ryuko would move on from me. I was just happy to be by her side while I could be. I knew she was going to end up with someone special. Like you.”

“Special? Don’t flatter me, please. We’re all just lucky people. Or unlucky, maybe, depends on your point of view.”

Haruka shook her head, “I don’t think so. I was so happy to see you with her. Really, I actually thought it was going to be Satsuki!” She laughed as if that was the most absurd thing in the world, “But what would she want to do with Satsuki? I mean, if she even likes women, which I don’t think is true. She’s beautiful but, I mean, she’s so cold! Can I be honest?”

“About what?”

“Satsuki – she scares me. If I got a chance to interview her I don’t know if I could.”

Rei thought about that, “She’s not that bad. If she seems cold, just think about how distant from everyone she’s been all her life. Remember what I told you about how Ragyo treated her?”

*I can’t believe I’m doing this. I can’t believe I’m defending Satsuki.*

*But then, I’m sure Ryuko understands that all too well. Wandering around in that big empty mansion, homeless for months. But she never understood me.*

*But I guess I never understood her either. I’m sure Satsuki gets her the same way she does. Maybe that’s where we went wrong. Neither of us was very good at that.*

“Well, she still scares me. But you don’t – I know you tried.”

Rei chuckled, “Don’t kid yourself, please, I saw your face.”

“Okay fine just a little bit!” Haruka responded with a sheepish smile.



“Well, it doesn’t matter either way. It’s over now.”

“Does it have to be? I thought you said it was a break.”

“That’s what I said.”

“So…”

“Look I’m still not going to talk about that with you. I’m settled into this life of fighting REVOCS, and sure I miss her, but I – we – wouldn’t trade it. And you can put that on record.”

“Okay! And Rei?”

“Hmm?”

“The black leather jacket look was my favorite too.”

~~~~~

Rei left feeling something quite a bit different than what she’d claimed. People cared about her life, smart and plucky people like Haruka. Normal people. They were rooting for her. She was special. What did Satsuki have compared to that?

She and Furashada were of one mind. They could go back to the good times with Ryuko, and fix the bad. They could win her back.

They *would* win her back.

~~~~~

As for Haruka, well, she was riding the high from that meeting for a week. After a great deal of stress and long nights of furious writing, she determined that she would self-publish online. And it caught on like wildfire. It really had been her big break.

She wouldn’t forget what she owed Rei. She felt blessed just to have brushed up to her that once.

If someone had told her then that she would one day be wearing a Kamui herself, she might have died of joy on the spot.

~~~~~

What neither of them could know was that they weren’t the only ones privy to this conversation. Izanami was in every system in the Research Complex, and Shiro happened to be on his lunch break too. He heard everything from his seat in the secret server room, humming with self-satisfied thoughtfulness.

“Well now, what an interesting thing we’ve stumbled on today.”

It's worth noting that despite being present for this whole chapter Kamui Furashada doesn't have any lines of his own. Because he and Rei have such a deep bond, he only needs to speak separately if they disagree on something. The same goes for the other Kamui to a certain extent, and this seems to be how Ryuko and Senketsu worked too. So in most cases you can assume the wearer is speaking for both of them.

# Kiryuin Homestead 3:1

## Chapter Summary

Due to time constraints I'm gonna have to cut this one up. I have a couple more Ryuko and Satsuki scenes planned out for this bit, and a Ryuko and Houka+Shiro scene. Despite my tendency to stretch things out I'm really gonna try and keep those short. Except the last Ryuko/Satsuki one which is just for fun and fluff. Hoping to have them up over the course of this week. Might even consolidate them into one chapter when they're all up, haven't decided yet

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November 2066

~~~~~

"I'm sure you're aware, milady, but making a non-family member a co-owner of your fortune is highly irregular. Of course there's nobody better to trust with it than *Lady Ryuko*, but... people will talk. What are they supposed to think?"

Ryuko's ears pricked when she heard this filter through the door – Satsuki's accountant, trying to be as quiet as possible. Not quiet enough to beat Ryuko's ears, he couldn't have managed that except by writing (and even then, she probably could've guessed from pen strokes).

"Well, you said it yourself, who better than her?" Satsuki responded. "Let them talk, she's a symbol of goodness and the struggle of the working class to people around the world. Nothing but good press."

"But...", Ryuko could hear the sigh, "Of course, I trust your judgement. It's just my obligation as your executor to address these concerns."

He was so deferential to Satsuki, Ryuko could practically see him bowing. Not surprising, considering he was a member of Houka's information committee back in the day. But she was smiling, Ryuko could hear it in her voice, "I know, why run the risk? I understand. But my wallet's always been open to her, you know that. The only thing this changes is that now she can run the Kiryuin Foundation for me, which will be good for both of us, trust me. I realize my purchase orders for the Foundation projects have been lacking on detail lately, I apologize. I've had to cut time somewhere since Rei is too busy with her Kamui to help me."

"Nonsense! I haven't noticed any change; your forms are as helpful as always, I always know exactly what you want me to buy."

*I bet she was actually too specific. I bet she walked him through every step like a cookie recipe. The corners of Ryuko's mouth twisted up into a wistful smile on their own. I bet he's actually relieved.*

“The flattery is completely unnecessary,” Satsuki said as she stood. Ryuko could hear her walking around her desk and see the doorknob twist. Her accountant stood to go as well. “Well, thanks for your help. Until next time?”

“Oh, uh, didn’t you want to update the will?”

“No, I think that’s going to be its final form.”

“Okay, but...,” His voice became a whisper, “But this just says you’re leaving it all to Ryuko!”

This was news to Ryuko. She felt like her heart might burst.

“Right,” Satsuki said as she opened the door to let him out of her office. The sharply dressed, handsome young man with eyes that looked very big compared to tiny wire frame spectacles bowed again, and when he looked up at Satsuki’s face he could see quite clearly that “*No, you’re not allowed to ask about that*” was the answer to whatever he might have said. Then he saw Ryuko was still there, made a little “eep!” noise, and was quickly on his way.

When he was gone Ryuko raised her eyebrows as high as they’d go and walked into Satsuki’s arms. Fortunately, her receptionist was nowhere to be seen.

“Well that’s done – oh!” Satsuki yelped when Ryuko kissed her, threading a hand around her waist. “What was that for?”

“For? ‘Nothing but good press’,” She chuckled, “You’ve got a real wild sense of humor sometimes.”

“Hmhmhmhm,” Satsuki couldn’t help but laugh in her humming way as they went back into Satsuki’s office. Immediately on to the next thing, she was rifling through papers as soon as she sat down. Since the day Nonon and the rest hadn’t called in, Ryuko had gotten used to spending a lot of time here and she plonked herself down in a chair on Satsuki’s side of the desk, facing the great picture window that overlooked the bustle of the new government offices, built where the old Kiryuin Tower had once dominated the skyline, “If I’d known you were listening... but no matter. So, how does it feel to finally have your inheritance?”

“Like you’re about to put me to work spending it all,” Ryuko quipped, “Nah, I’m kiddin’. It feels... weird. So, he doesn’t know we’re related, huh?”

“No, not a clue. Which is good, no?”

“Well sure, I mean it’s inconvenient but I don’t mind skipping classes to sign some papers. It’s just, it’s almost like you *planned* it.”

“Oh? And who was it who kept the name Matoi?”

“Whaaat? Okay, well to be fair, would you want to be associated with *her* if you had the choice?

“Well, I can’t *argue* with that,” Satsuki said playfully.

“Okay, okay, maybe I did leave the option open.”

“Hmm. Maybe I did too.”

“You think you’re so clever,” Ryuko smirked as she leaned over and kissed her again, starting by the ear and working across the smooth skin of her cheek to the corner of her mouth. But Satsuki held up a hand before she could get there.

“Ryuko! It’s the middle of the day!” Satsuki sounded just a little scandalized, and also understood more clearly than Ryuko did that she couldn’t fall behind on her schedule to indulge her more demanding urges without leaving dozens of people waiting.

“I know, I’m sorry,” Ryuko separated, but Satsuki put a conciliatory hand on her head, ruffling her hair as she tapped the stack of papers on the table to even them out, then checked to make sure she hadn’t missed anything (this was a bit awkward to do with one hand).

She offered them to Ryuko, “Here, take a look at -,”

“-We should just go public with it.”

“No.”

“But why not?” Ryuko whined, “Your accountant knows we’re... in a relationship now.”

“He only suspects it. He knows better than to jump to conclusions where I am concerned, and besides, he’d never tell anyone.”

“No, but if a smart guy like him was able to figure out *that* but not that we’re related – ach!” Ryuko cut herself off in frustration. Satsuki was supposed to be smart, she must see that they weren’t good enough at keeping this secret, and now the best move was to get out ahead of it. “Look, we’ve already got the two people who are going to be the most pissed at us pissed at us, and they haven’t told anyone.”

“That’s because they know our public images are too important.”

“Well sure, but people who don’t know us won’t know the difference if it’s us telling them. Even your accountant didn’t know we’re related!”

“Ryuko!” Satsuki snapped, pulling her hand away. “I can’t afford to humor you on this. How can you even consider it? What happened to feeling guilty? What happened to ‘living with it’?”

“... I love you,” Ryuko answered, not sweetly but in a plain, simple voice. That was all there was to it.

“And I...,” Satsuki sighed, “I love you too, but you know what we have isn’t something we can show the world. It’s not a *relationship*.”

Ryuko looked hurt, and Satsuki quickly darted her eyes away. She hadn’t meant for that to come out that way.

“I’m sorry, I said that wrong. You know I want, I *wish* almost as much as I wish for peace that we could have a normal relationship. You know that, right?”

“Well yeah, of course.”

“But that’s just not going to happen, I don’t know how it ever could.”

“... I know.”

Ryuko was here not just to get those forms signed for the accountant, but to discuss taking over at the Kiryuin Foundation. After seeing how losing contact with Nonon had affected Satsuki she knew more than ever she had to do this, just to get her schedule down to something more manageable. But she didn’t seem to Satsuki to be at all ready for that, and for the first time in this conversation Satsuki realized she wasn’t just being impulsive. This was deadly serious to her.

“Is what we have now that bad? I don’t think so.”

“No, no! God no. It’s just... I heard you talking about your will, okay?”

“... I see. You don’t approve, I take it.”

“Don’t approve? What does it matter? What good is a trillion dollars gonna do me when you’re...” She trailed off, and Satsuki nodded, “And I don’t even care about the money. If I really wanted, I could ask for anything and someone would get it for me. Hell, I could *take* anything I wanted, nobody could stop me.”

Satsuki didn’t respond right away. It was hard to decided how to respond when she was too captivated by the glint in Ryuko’s eyes behind what seemed like a mere casual glance. It suddenly seemed too grim for such a sunny, brisk fall day, for the peaceful blue sky that trailed by above the Tokyo skyline in front of them. Stuck forever here after Satsuki was long gone, with a hole in her brain where her other half used to be. Furious that Satsuki would think she had any use for the money. Almost unwilling to even consider any of this. And yet...

And yet Satsuki was leaving it all to her, small and empty gesture that might be in the face of immortality.

“Well then, let’s spend some of it.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t want the money, fine. At least let me show you how to dispose of it properly.”

Despite herself, Ryuko smiled, “I just told you none of this stuff matters to me compared to you dying, and you just blow right on with it, huh?”

“Well, we have to do something until then, don’t we? And don’t say it doesn’t matter. These papers here have the power to save thousands of people’s lives and make the lives of millions better. That’s worth a lot.”

“Sure but, I dunno, I’m not saying I got cold feet about all this, but if my time with you’s limited, I’d rather spend it doing something fun, y’know?”

“This will be fun Ryuko, trust me.”

“I do, y’know what, screw it, I do,” she stood up. “You’re right, busy day ahead of us, let’s not get down thinking about stuff like that.”

But Satsuki grabbed her hand before she could walk away, “You do have to read this before you can get to the fun part though.” The papers were in Ryuko’s hand before she could protest.

Ryuko groaned, paging through it. Lots of descriptions of projects that were currently ongoing, personnel she’d have working under her. If she’d thought Satsuki would let her figure that out as she went, she was sadly mistaken, “All this? This is more than I’ve read for college in... ever!”

Satsuki hummed at that, “The fact that you think that says more about those papers than your performance in college is, frankly, a searing indictment.”

## Chapter End Notes

I barely even remember why I picked to write this particular scene, but I kinda like it anyway. A lot of Ryuko/Satsuki parts in this fic become meditations on what Ryuko is and what that means, I know, but the way I see it that would kind of matter quite a lot and happen to come up in conversation pretty often. If you were an immortal demigod that would probably influence your day-to-day life at least once a week, right?

I've got some outlining to do coming up to figure out the details of how the next bit will play out so if you have any questions or scenes you want to see or characters you want to touch base with please drop a comment. I know at this point most readers don't comment and obviously that's fine but it's the best way for me to know what aspects specifically engaged you and works for you. And if something doesn't work I *\*really\** want to know about that.

## Kiryuin Homestead 3:2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 2066

~~~~~

“So, I see you’ve finally come around to our ideas about college, I see,” Houka said with a smug smirk, pushing up his glasses. He didn’t need to spend all day in his computer anymore, not now that his Kamui Misaki was partially wired into her own supercomputer – soon she would be as vast an intellectual force as Izanami and together they would be doubly efficient. But for now Houka was happy enough that he could *see* the code through his mind’s eye. When Ryuko interrupted them he and Misaki were busy upgrading the government firewalls. Misaki’s caution, bordering on paranoia, made this a natural job for her.

“This isn’t like normal learning, though. Plus, I think if I asked my old physics professor about it, he’d die of shock. Not like I was a good student or anything,” Ryuko responded with a shrug.

“I’ve been saying it for years,” Shiro chimed in, “College is all well and good if you want to become a perfectly average engineer. Or a *lawyer*. Heh.” He sat up in his big leather chair, “So, what do you need?”

“Well, uh... I was wondering if you could tell me what exactly I am.”

“Well now. That’s a *big* ask. You’re aware I’m sure that discussion of higher dimensions in any definitive terms is a pretty advanced subject... what did you get in physics, anyway?”

Ryuko laughed, “... Ohhh man. Let’s not talk about that.”

“Hah!” Houka blurted. “Quite. But Shiro’s right, it’s extremely complicated. Now, could we dumb it down? Yes. But between building the new server block for Misaki and running interference on all these REVOCS mooks, maybe it’s better off we just give you some reading on it.”

Ryuko looked crestfallen, and suddenly Izanami cut in over the loudspeaker. *~[Oh c’mon I can make her a nice presentation, all you guys have to do is help give it!]~*

“Really? You can?” Ryuko asked excitedly.

*~[Of course! I’m running the particle accelerator, all the safety mechanisms in the complex, and backup emergency systems at every nuclear plant in the country, y’know. Just in case.]~*

Ryuko’s eyebrow’s shot up, “I-is that legal?”

“Take it up with Satsuki,” Shiro shrugged.



*~[You can thank me next time there's a big earthquake and the systems just mysteriously shut down juuust in time! But back on the matter at hand, I can for sure write up anything you want! In fact, I started writing it already.]~*

“Awesome! You’re the best Izanami!” The glow of pride from Izanami at praise from her creator was palpable in a fearsome glow that made Shiro shuffle with discomfort.

*~[No problem! Oh, and if you want anything else, you just ask, please!]*~

“Well, actually, if you don’t mind I would kinda like if you could maybe do more little presentations for me. Y’know, stuff like, uhhh... history, foreign language, nature, that kinda thing? I’m here like every day absorbing more life-fibers or sparring with you guys, maybe you guys could teach me something while I’m here?”

Houka appraised her thoughtfully, “This wasn’t entirely your idea, was it?”

“Well... now that you mention it, Satsuki might’ve said something”

### ~~~~The Week Before~~~~

“That was wonderful Ryuko, really,” Satsuki said, dismissing with a wave a swarm of cameramen and audio workers who scurried around to disassemble the sound-shell. As part of her capacity as the new CEO of The Kiryuin Foundation, Ryuko had just given a speech about a new project they’d just started – redoing the water pipes across all of North Kanto. Generations of cost cutting meant far too many of them were leaching lead. Ryuko was especially proud of this one, it had been partially her idea.

When she’d passed through North Kanto on her homeless wanderings, before she came to Honnouji, she couldn’t ignore just how bad the water had tasted. People had wondered how she drank it without filtering, but of course a hybrid wasn’t going to be hurt by a few poisonous metals. Not that she knew that at the time, she just didn’t care if she lived or died was all.

And now here she was, breaking ground in front of a vast crowd while a fleet of construction vehicles stood ready to lurch to work behind her. *Her* construction vehicles, moved by her hand. All those people who’d been kind to her, given her a bit of food here and there, huddled with her in the shanties on those winter nights, now they were watching her come back. God did she hope she was doing well. She hoped they were proud. They looked proud.

“Ach, do you really think? I forgot what I was saying halfway through, I *stammered!*”

“No, nobody noticed,” Satsuki reassured her, straightening her collar. *Although we will have to do something about the way you wear your suits. Amazing that you can make something this perfectly tailored then put it on like you just got back from a night on the town.*

“You shoulda done it, I’m telling you. I’m no good at this!”

“Well, you’re never going to get better unless you practice. And you’re fine already. Just think about like when you were shouting at me all those times. Didn’t seem too concerned about who was watching then.”

“Heh, you say that. But without the anger, it’s hard to miss the crowds.”

“Hmm. Well, they certainly didn’t miss you. Now, don’t worry about, really,” Ryuko still looked a little antsy (the way Satsuki’s fingers played at her neck wasn’t helping – *can’t do that in public!*) “Here, I know what’ll keep your mind off it – let’s go see what they do with it next.”

Satsuki showed Ryuko through the mess of trailers they’d drove out to this ceremony. Editors, makeup, sound-shell design. Mako was there too, over with the manager whose job it was to make sure the audience was looked after, and she waved excitedly when Satsuki and Ryuko passed by. She was brimming with excitement as she helped hand out complementary souvenirs to everyone as they filed out of their seats, and when people recognized her and asked for autographs (and plenty did), she nearly died from joy.

But that wasn’t what struck Ryuko most. Sure it was cool, but what was confusing was the trailer full of people just... typing.

“So what’s this about?” She asked.

“Oh! Translators,” Satsuki said as they walked through the trailer and left out the other side, “They’re writing out subtitles for you in a huge number of languages. I try to do my own, but I’ve had them on staff for a while so I could check to make sure I got everything right.”

“Wait, you – no don’t tell me.”

“Hmhmhm yes, I’m afraid your suspicions are correct.”

“You speak, like, multiple languages? Get out! Which ones?”

“Oh, just... English, Chinese, Hindi, Russia of course, plus Spanish, French – in our household that was necessary – oh, and Arabic. You know, everything a modern businesswoman needs.”

“I... I don’t know what I expected. How the *hell*.”

“Oh, it’s not that hard, anyone could do it. It just takes time which, as a child, I had no choice to but to have. Uzu knows five languages, you know that? He never paid attention in English class for four years and now look. You could do it. Actually, you *should* do it if you’re going to keep on being in charge of business.”

Ryuko was aghast, “I can’t do that! I-I mean, I don’t know the first thing about it! Plus, if you really want me to do this aren’t there more important things to do? Like, shouldn’t I be learning about, I dunno... economy or some shit? I just do what your guys tell me, sign what they want me to sign, sit in that office and people come in with project ideas and I send them out with a check! Look I’m happy to do it if it keeps it off your back, but if you want me to come up with my own ideas – like you were – I think there’s more important things I should learn than another language.”

“That’s a great idea!”

“Wait...”

“Yes, I think what you need is some context. How could you know what to do, not like anyone ever told you. How we got here, where we’re going... You know who you should ask? Shiro, and Houka, and their Kamui too. They’ve got the sum total of human knowledge at their fingertips; it wouldn’t take them any time at all. You’re down there all the time anyway”

“Now I wasn’t saying I wanted more homework. They’ll talk right over me, you know that!” Satsuki took to the idea instantly, and Ryuko realized that to her this was suddenly more than idle chit-chat. This was another bright idea from Satsuki that filled her with unease.

“I don’t think so, they’ve got the Kamui right now. Izanami can... moderate Shiro’s worse impulses. That’s kind of the point, no?”

“Ach, I can’t!” Ryuko held up her hands to her temples like it hurt just to think about it. It did. They existed in a different world from her, and what they did there was all well and good, but she... she didn’t belong there. “They’re too smart for me!”

Ryuko didn’t know what was happening until it already had. Satsuki *slapped* her. It didn’t hurt, and it was really more a chiding thing, but Ryuko was open mouthed anyway.

“Hey!”

The look in Satsuki’s eyes took her back. So intense, so commanding. Like the old Satsuki. Had she ever stood this close to the old Satsuki?

“Don’t say things like that! I tutored you for *months* to get you through high school and you want to tell me that was all for nothing?”

“Oh, like that did anyone any good, thanks,” she said with sarcastic snark.

Satsuki whipped her head around to make sure nobody was around. They’d wandered off from the construction site into the woods. Far enough away that they wouldn’t attract attention.

“Don’t give me that sh-crap. People say I’m a ‘genius’, but what ever gifts I might have are in your genes too. You’re going to get educated.”

“Don’t tell me what – wait... did you just censor yourself?” Ryuko’s face suddenly cracked into a huge smile, “Hohoholy shit Sats that was fuckin’ adorable!”

“No I – Don’t change the subject!” Satsuki blurted, still in the emphatic “old Satsuki” voice. But her face went red. “You are a public figure, and that means you *must* have an education befitting that.”

“Oh, that’s just not going to happen, you know that. You can’t *command* it to happen,” Ryuko was still chuckling to herself, “You can’t intimidate me anymore, I thought you’d know that.”

Satsuki stepped forward until she was looming right over Ryuko, “I’m not commanding. I’m telling you what you need to do.” Not at all what the look in her eyes was saying.

Ryuko couldn’t resist it. She went up on the balls of her feet and kissed Satsuki, locking lips until her hands were stiff at her side, totally paralyzed.

“Oh, you bitch,” Satsuki murmured appreciatively.

“That’s more like it,” Ryuko smirked. But Satsuki looked ruffled. Far from thinking about how someone might have seen them (luckily nobody did), she was disappointed. She hadn’t realized how good it would be if Ryuko had the sort of education she seemed so determined to avoid. Not just practically, she knew Ryuko could be just as smart as her if she wanted and the

thought of a Ryuko capable of that was... she was disappointed. “You really want me to do this, don’t you?”

Satsuki nodded, “I think it would help you but more than that, oh I don’t know, we could talk. About history and philosophy, intellectual things. I’d really like that.”

Ryuko didn’t belong in that world, of deep thoughts and knowledge. But that’s where Satsuki resided. “Yeah, me too.”

Ryuko left that day with a list of topics she was to ask Houka and Shiro about. Satsuki left with an improved appreciation for something she should’ve known already. Ryuko would do things just to make her happy. Why did she even bother raising her voice to begin with, when had that ever worked?

~~~~~

The next day, Ryuko was back, and Izanami had set up some comfy chairs in the life-fiber storage room so Ryuko could take her first lesson while absorbing life-fibers. She managed to talk Shiro into helping her, although technically she could’ve done it herself. But, despite having developed several simulated focus tests based on various psychosocial models of Ryuko, she was nervous. The real one was right in front of her (well “in front of her” was an odd term for someone who essentially *was* the lab).

But she was excited too. Like all her Kamui, she was excited to just be in the warm, soothing aura of her creator, even more so to see that she arrived dressed for business – in that suit jacket with the golden embroidery and the shiny epaulettes she looked larger than life. But then while they waited for Shiro she projected her human avatar onto a screen and they started talking. All nervousness quickly evaporated, just as all Ryuko’s fear that she might be in for a lecture, and as her aloofness dropped her aura glowed brighter than ever.

Shiro pretended like this was all a huge inconvenience as he sat down across from Ryuko, sighing and running his hand through his hair.

“So, Ryuko, you want to know what you are.”

“Uh... if I say no?”

Shiro nodded, “Tell me, do you know what a tesseract is?”

“Oh! The cube from those old superhero movies!” Ryuko snapped her fingers happily.

“No.”

~[Take a look at this]~ On her screen, Izanami’s avatar moved aside to show a simple 3D model of a tesseract, a sort of cube-within-a-cube looking structure.

“Now, this is the three dimensional ‘shadow’ of a four-dimensional shape called a tesseract. You know how a three-dimensional objects like you and I have two-dimensional shadows, yes?”

“Sure?”

“Well, try if you can to imagine something with four dimensions. X, Y, Z, and... another one. Its shadow would be a 3D shape, like how in a shadow you drop the Z and you just have X

and Y.”

~[And this one is the most basic one, it's the shadow of a shape with cubes for sides]~

“Wha – that doesn’t make sense. You can’t make sides out of cubes.”

“In four-dimensional space you can.”

“That still doesn’t make any sense. What does this have to do with what exactly I am. I mean I know you said part of me is in another dimension but...” She shrugged, “I can’t picture it. Where does the extra dimension go?”

“You *can’t* picture it. That’s the point,” Shiro shrugged, “It goes... in, sort of. You couldn’t imagine it no matter how hard you tried.”

“Well then how’s this supposed to help?”

“Okay, imagine that you were a two-dimensional creature.”

“Like under a microscope?”

“Eh, sure.”

~[But even thinner. And they can’t see through the glass, just on the same level they’re on. Now, imagine that you could stick your finger through the microscope slide]~ Izanami drew up a graphic to show what this would look like.

“Oh, so they’d just see a slice.”

~[Exactly!/]~

Ryuko nodded, “So you think I’m just a slice of some kind of giant space... thing?”

“Huh,” *She’s picking this up fast.*

~[Shiro thinks you’re getting it]~

“I didn’t say that!” Shiro blurted, and Izanami giggled. “But you aren’t far off. It’s not you that’s the shadow, the slice, the portion of a larger thing we can’t conceive of. It’s the life-fibers in general. They don’t *come* from a different dimension, they’re in it at all times. It’s layered on top of ours. We merely see them as little red thread things. And you... well, it’s not that your body is the slice. Your flesh is made of atoms, mere matter.”

“But the life-fibers inside me, they’re the shadow of what I really am. So what kind of 4D freak is sliced up into me-shape.”

“Well, life-fibers are infinitely thin, remember that. So, their true arrangement isn’t really like your body, they’re just sort of... jammed in there.”

“Oh. So...”

~[We made a model of what it would look like, check it out!/]~

“Now, what you’re about to see took all night and a lot of computing power, it’s not just an artist’s interpretation. This is what it would look like if your entire body was destroyed – incinerated, ripped apart. Now, if there was nobody around to absorb you, like you did Ragyo -,”

Ryuko shuddered and looked away, but quickly composed herself, “- Sorry, go on.”

“Well, without anything to interrupt it, you’d just reconstruct your material body in a moment,” He chuckled, “If you hadn’t been right next to her Ragyo would probably have had quite a shock. Anyway, without further ado...”

The screen changed, and Izanami was gone. In her place there was something... else. A vast shape, a woven structure of thousands of strands – thin red ones, thick blue ones like tree trunks. Six pairs of huge, rounded structures. Eyes, carved in fire on a great, curved beak of a face. Wings that bubbled and seethed, stretching out like an aurora of life-fibers. Shiro stared at it in awe

But Ryuko felt sick, “I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“Well look at it, I’m a goddamn monster!”

~[Hey, don’t say that!/~

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Shiro said, “Just because your life-fibers look like a city-sized dragon... thing.”

“City-sized!”

“Read the scale bar – listen, this is all unknown territory for all of us. Why would your judgements of what’s good and what’s monstrous apply to a world no human can even conceive of. I actually have a theory that all us normal humans might create a 4D signal from our nervous systems. What we look like in the larger universe must be... bizarre. Compared to that a bundle of life-fibers seems downright orderly. You might be the natural one on the cosmic scale, and us the monsters. After all, we’re just a bunch of weird arrangements of carbon and oxygens living on the congealed soup skin of a molten rock and you’re written into the *fabric of the universe*.”

“...Huh.” Ryuko didn’t but that for a minute, but there was point arguing over it, you couldn’t change his mind. She wondered if Izanami agreed though.

“Personally, I think you should be grateful. Something of that size. Something larger, longer lasting than any of us. I only hope whatever’s left of us mere mortals creates nearly the same impression.”

“Don’t tell me you wanna trade places?”

“Heh. Don’t worry about that. Izanami is likely just as long-lived as you, and she’s smarter than any human could ever be. In a way, you’ve given all of us the closest thing to immortality we can have. I think I’m satisfied with that. For now.”

Ryuko realized neither of them had any idea what life would be like for her once he was gone. She’d be stuck, same as Ryuko was.

“You know what? Fuck all this. Creepy. Let’s talk about history or somehtin’ now, huh?”

## Chapter End Notes

I have no idea why I write like this.

You might be wondering why Shiro has come to be the one who more actively takes the story forward than Houka. Well, as I see it, all Houka really wanted to do in the show was hang out with Nonon and collect knowledge. Shiro goes a little further, Satsuki shared her plans for humanity with him even in the first episode. The way I see him it’s not enough for him to get knowledge, he’s got to do something with it.

# Kiryuin Homestead 3:3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 2066

~~~~~

“Hellooo!” Ryuko called as she walked into Satsuki’s cottage, dropping her stuff by the door in a big heap as she did.

“In here, come in, dinner will be ready in few minutes,” Satsuki called from the den.

When Ryuko went, Satsuki was sitting with her laptop open, a fairly grave expression on her face.

“There’s something you need to read, before we can get on with our evening.”

“Uh-oh.” Ryuko plopped down next to her and took the laptop, already open to the relevant webpage. She read, “ ‘An Interview with Rei Hououmaru and her Kamui Furashada – Two Rising Stars in the Battle Against REVOCS’ - Hold on what the hell?”

“I know.”

“Didn’t you say this was against the rules?”

“Not rules, per se, but against our policy. We all agreed on it, but if she doesn’t want to follow through, then she can deal with the consequences,” Satsuki shrugged.

“Aw, don’t get her in trouble, c’mon. Wait, am I in this? Holy shit what does she say about me, is that why you wanted me to read this?” Ryuko noticed Satsuki’s fingers twitching on the armrest and pulled herself out of the laptop. “Don’t get her in trouble for this.”

“Did I say I would? But there’s something else you ought to know. That author’s name is a pen name.”

“No kidding. And the real name?”

“Haruka Naganohara.”

Ryuko jumped like she’d been shot. It was lucky she had those hybrid reflexes, or the laptop would’ve taken a spill. “WHAT! How the hell did she even...”

“I don’t know. I only found out about it from Shiro. They did the interview from the Research Complex, so obviously Izanami overheard everything.”

“She didn’t mention it when I went in for my lesson,” Ryuko muttered.

“Well, this was just yesterday it got published.”



“Oh.”

“They and Houka actually had quite some trouble trying to decide if they should even tell me. Not that they know about us, but they were worried I’d get her in trouble. They all agreed you should read it though.”

“... She doesn’t badmouth me here, does she?”

“If she does, it’s subtle. Read it.”

~~~~~

“...’When Ryuko first came up, Rei was quite hesitant to discuss her. ‘I’m not gonna tell you why we’re on a break’, she said, but as we went on, she was quick to discuss everything else about her,’ “ Ryuko read and then went on, still reading aloud, through the part where Rei recollected on their first date, and on to other memories. She could feel Satsuki’s eyes boring through her head while she read. Finally, she finished the part about her, “ ‘I never once felt a shred of anger or resentment from Rei, and though I have no business speculating about what might have happened between them, I can’t believe they parted with much drama or heartache. The affection, the fond memories of all the good times, it was genuine. She never told Ryuko she wasn’t that interested in the nightlife which Ryuko indulged in, and that stuck with me. Whatever it was that came between them, it seems that clash of personalities was never solved. And yet it did nothing to dim that abiding respect and, yes, even love that was still obvious as soon as the topic of Ryuko came up’. Huh, well that doesn’t sound that bad.”

Satsuki was, maybe pointedly, not looking at her. She had averted her eyes the moment Ryuko said the word “love” and was staring into her lap.

“Hey now, don’t get jealous. I’m here with you now, right?” She gave Satsuki a playful jab to the shoulder, “And besides, Haruka’s got it all wrong, believe me Rei was *pissed*. I don’t know which of their’s idea it was, but this is just to make it look like there’s no conflict among us. Propaganda! You love that shit, huh?”

Satsuki smiled shyly, “I appreciate that, but I still want to hear you say it.”

“Heh, I’m sure you do,” Ryuko sighed to give it the appropriate dramatic weight. She couldn’t let this sound hollow to Satsuki, no way. “I love you Satsuki, I know she’s in the past now. You really think this one article’s gonna change that? Who’m I here with right now, huh? Now c’mon,” She put the laptop down and practically jumped on Satsuki, “I got somethin’ fun planned for tonight.”

“Oh? Now what could that be.”

“Nothin’,” Ryuko said smugly, “Just, you guy’s’ve been teaching me so much lately, I thought I’d teach you something in exchange. Some real practical stuff, life skills.”

Satsuki smiled and exhaled through her nose as Ryuko settled onto her lap, straddling her thighs. She loved this seating arrangement, and she let her hands find their way around Ryuko wherever they wanted.

*To think I was worried that article would make her want to take Rei back. Honestly, would I care if she did? Could I really share her, so long as I have this? No, never!*

“That really all you’re gonna tell me?”

“You want to spoil the surprise?”

“I thought you’d know by now I can do without surprises.”

“Alright, alright. I’m gonna teach you how to get drunk properly.”

Satsuki’s hands froze and she frowned, “I don’t think so. After last time -,”

“But that’s the thing, last time! You didn’t know you’re limit, I wasn’t looking after you, it was all liquor. Bad situation, but if you know your limit it won’t happen again.”

“I don’t know...”

“Nah, trust me. You’ll learn the same way I did in middle school.”

“Oh?” *Ryuko doesn’t usually talk about her childhood!* “And what way is that?”

“Cheap beer!”

~~~~~

Satsuki shut the sliding door behind her, walking out onto the small patio with a swaying movement which was a mixture of voluntary and very much not so. When she saw Ryuko watching her she smiled coyly, but wavered a bit coming down the stairs. Crinkly brown leaved crunched under her sandals. Winter though it might have been, these days winter was far from uncomfortably cold, and this night was particularly hospitable. Enough so that they were reclining on the wicker lawn chairs in Satsuki’s secluded back garden, deep in the gloom of an impenetrable wall of pine shrubbery that totally concealed the garden from the outside world. Satsuki had actually just gotten back from putting her jacket back inside, it was that warm out.

“So? How’re we feeling?” Ryuko asked with a coy smile as Satsuki paced in front of her.

“I’m definitely feeling something.”

“Well I hope so! You’ve had two cans in the past hour and you’ve barely touched your dinner, you’d better be feeling something.”

“Vision feels like... I have to try to focus on anything in particular. And it feels both hot and cold here,” She pointed towards her stomach. “What?” She said when she noticed Ryuko’s smile crack with a chuckle.

“Nothin’! It’s just funny to hear you talk about it like a scientist.”

“Well, I should expect you know quite well what it feels like, but I’ve never had a chance to really observe the way the body processes alcohol in detail,” Satsuki shot back, “Er, how many have you had, anyway?”

Ryuko held up her can with a proud smile, and gestured towards a few more crumpled ones on the ground next to her, “This is my fifth right here.”

“Fifth!”

“Haha! Better keep up! Here, have another can,” Ryuko grabbed another beer from the cardboard case and handed it up to Satsuki, who clicked it open and took a sip, grimacing at the taste. “I’m kidding though, seriously. Since I don’t have to eat every day anymore my stomach shrunk or somethin’ so five’s gonna be it for me for a while.”

“Oh. But you’re still -,”

“- Hammered? Not yet, not yet.”

Satsuki nodded and looked at the condensation beading on her beer thoughtfully. “You know, cans really are amazing. Keeps food safe to eat as long as you could reasonably need without any plastic. Of course, now it’s hardly impressive, but when they were first invented in the eighteen-hundreds it was really transformative. Invented for the French military during the Napoleonic Wars, did you know that?”

“You wanna come here and make your observations rather than pacing around?”

Satsuki shrugged and, after a moment of indecision, nestled into Ryuko’s lawn chair instead of her own. Ryuko threw an arm around her shoulder and she sighed in satisfaction. “You probably don’t want to hear about that.”

“Mmmmm no. Not right now, anyway. Drink some more, c’mon.”

~~~~~

The hours wore on and the night sky got progressively deeper lavender, shafting through the bare branches of the trees above them. This close to the city it would never get dark enough to see the stars, but Ryuko set a fire anyway.

“So? You gonna tell me yet?”

“Tell you what?” Ryuko said, as though she didn’t know. Satsuki had only been asking about it incessantly since her seventh can (which was her most recent, she was managing to pace herself). Her vision was swimming disconcertingly, and everywhere she turned her head there was Ryuko. There was her hand – nails unpainted, she’d thrown all her nail polish away in an effort to exorcise Ragyo. There was her hair, glinting in the firelight. There were her lips, her gear-pupiled eyes, her legs, her... breasts. Satsuki felt like she was sinking into her, like there was something that was going to happen, that *had* to happen. She knew what it was, and she was excited but also... nervous.

Ryuko, meanwhile, was so drunk that she felt like she might fall asleep, but she knew where this was going too and she wasn’t going home without it. But she also knew she could use her powers to clear the alcohol from her system in a snap – she’d even gotten it down so she could make herself only *somewhat* less drunk. So why not linger here a little while longer? She was comfortable, and the beer was cold and crisp, and she hadn’t had a night like this and it was nostalgic.

“You know what!” Satsuki nestled in even closer, “Tell me about the first time you got drunk!”

“Sats, c’mon, you know there’s not much to tell. I mean, kids do stupid shit, they get told they can’t do somethin’ sssso they do it,” Ryuko struggled to keep herself from slurring words,

envious that Satsuki didn't seem to have that problem whatsoever.

"No. I don't. So happens if someone did something forbidden at my school they didn't get a chance to get told it was wrong."

"Riiiiiight. How could I forget," Ryuko said sarcastically. She looked over at Satsuki and saw the pout on her face. So childish and petulant. Adorable. "Ah what the hell, let's go. So, it was seventh grade, place down by Odawara. I actually had some friends that time – well, I dunno. Friends... nobody really had friends at that place. But I hung out with these eighth graders, real tough guys, real greaseball punks. You'd'a liked 'em," Satsuki smiled into Ryuko's shoulder at that, "Anyway, they liked me 'cuz I threw a better punch than most of 'em, even though I was half their size. The first time I walked by the corner store they hung out at, this guy Taro, they called him 'the worm' made a pass at me and I belted him one good."

"Hold on, you said they called him -,"

"- And after that, well, I was in. We started making jabs at each other every time I passed by and -,"

"-Nohoho wait! Why, what could he have done to be called the-'the worm'?" Satsuki shook Ryuko insistently, giddy with a sort of giggling laughter Ryuko had never heard from her before. Her voice turned up just a hair.

At that point the conversation wound discursive, Ryuko stumbling through a description of the whole little gang and everything they got up to and Satsuki listened, enraptured. She felt like she was in this world – Ryuko was back to dressing the way she used to with her floppy white trainers and a ragged army jacket (she seemed to have picked up more of them in different colors someplace) – she imagined herself as Ryuko's classmate, hanging on her arm while they stood with her crew of street thugs out in front of a dingy corner store.

" – Alright, alright, I can tell you the real part now, the actual thing I was supposed to tell. Beer, right?"

"Oh! Right," Satsuki sat up at full attention.

"So, we were in real good with the guy at the corner store we hung out at. He didn't really give a shit about us loitering – pretty nice guy actually – knew we were all gonna go to either a Kiryuin or Takarada high school and become goons in, er, in your little wars or if we were really... 'lucky', transferred to Honnouji. So he let us take some beer, y'know, when no one was watching or looking or cops or nothin'. So's long as we kept the other gangs from shoplifting, and we were *pret-ty good*. Heh, there was this one-time tha-when I thrashed this guy while we were drinking. Almost blackout, I threw up right after, but you shoulda seen him! Aaaaand that was the one what got me transferred from the school."

Satsuki's eyebrows furrowed in a complicated dance, like she was trying to remember how to make an appropriately skeptical expression. "I don't believe that," She finally pronounced.

"What? Get outta here why would I lie!"

"That's like exactly the sort of thing you'd lie about! Some silly pointless story of you being soooo tough, you love those," Satsuki rolled on top of her, pushed herself up, and suddenly it was hard for Ryuko not to look right down her shirt. "Now c'mon, what really happened?"

Through her addled brain, Ryuko eventually remembered Rei's interview with some degree of panic. *If she doesn't believe this, what else might she not believe?*

"No, I'm serious!"

"Nobody can fight drunk; you've seen too many movies."

"Nuh-uh! It's like the, the Vikings! You like history, you know."

"Oh, so you're a Viking now? And that's not even historically accurate!"

"Oh yeah? So what is it then?"

"It's, it's, it's," Satsuki tapped the side of her head in frustration, "It was hallucinogenic," (Satsuki's speech momentarily broke and she tripped over the word), "Halla-halluncine oh you know, some kind of drugs. Look, you just can't fight drunk. I was trained by the best of the best, I know it's true."

"... Wanna prove it?"

"You... can't be serious. Now?"

"Well sure. We got this little yard, c'mon, let's throw down."

"..."

"You know you want to."

"Come to mention it... I do think I have a few spare Shinai somewhere around here."

~~~~~

Mere minutes later the clatter of Shinai could be heard, a faint reverberation through the dense hedge walls. But inside the noise was deafening.

"Oh, c'mon! You're not even trying!" Ryuko feinted left, sliced right, skirted around Satsuki and, with the sort of tiptoeing caution of a wolf trying to find an opening around the horns of a buffalo, lunged in again. Satsuki easily, almost clumsily, smacked down each of them.

Satsuki sighed, "I'm sorry. I was just... it's not right."

"Well what is that supposed to mean now?" Ryuko pulled up, suddenly concerned. Maybe she really was too drunk. Nothing would ruin this night faster than Satsuki throwing up everywhere.

"I'm not sure, it's just... I'm not trying to win by not playing, I promised I'd try but I just can't hit you," Satsuki bumbled through it, she hadn't realized how much the world was spinning until she stood up

Ryuko responded to that by spitting, and yelling an exaggerated taunt, "Fuck that, what else are you gonna do? Best training in the world huh? Shouldn't you be able to handle *any* situation? And I thought a *Kiryuin* would have a little more *pride* in that, even... y'know, all things considered."

“And what is *that* supposed to mean? Like you’d know anything about it. All your training and experience comes from the *streets*. *Matoi*.”

Ryuko froze, “Wait... you liked that, didn’t you?” A devilish smile crept over her face.

Satsuki, meanwhile, twisted her mouth into a smile too, “Well, when you put it like that, maybe we could try doing it like, er, old times?”

“Oh my god. That’s... you’re an insane person, you know that?”

“You won’t?”

“Oh no, I didn’t say that. In fact, I’ll show you just what a dumabass-stupid idea this is, Kiryuin!” Ryuko lifted her sword and pointed it in challenge right towards Satsuki’s head – a perfectly useless position, tactically, but the way her eyes glared like lasers down its bamboo blade was exactly the sort of thing that Satsuki *wanted* to hit. And she was way too drunk to stop and think how messed up that was.

“You may try, Matoi, you may try. But if your bladework is as sloppy as your manners, I’m afraid there’s no hope for you!” Satsuki said, and without a moment’s hesitation lunged right at Ryuko.

Of course, the lunge wasn’t any good, she stumbled and teetered unbalanced at the end. Imperceptible to anyone but an expert, of course, but that hardly mattered. Now they were off, firing hasty, shoddy insults at each other, skirting across the grass and stumbling through the gardens, hacking just as hastily but with quite a bit more competence. Ryuko was a whirl of motion, leaping around Satsuki, occasionally channeling a bit of her superhuman capabilities when she thought Satsuki could handle it, blurring through the bare branches.

Meanwhile Satsuki was doing all she could to keep her feet. She tried going back to her fundamentals, imagining herself as an aspen in a storm – her body swaying every which way, but her roots planted deep. But that just made her dizzy, and Ryuko would come in with another – she had to admit – competent attack, and then her arm would just leap out and block it and counter all on its own, barely giving her any time to think how interesting it was that that happened.

*Ryuko has a point. This is a very interesting experiment. Plus a great way to burn all the extra calories from that fermented... starch. Hah! Oh, imagine if I could tell her before I met her...* And at that thought Satsuki was laughing, and then Ryuko was laughing too, although she didn’t know why, and then one of them, maybe both of them mixed in a punch and then a kick and then Ryuko’s hand snaked up her wrist and - *God dammit she shouldn’t be that good* - Satsuki’s shinai was on the ground. So, one solid kick right to Ryuko’s chin, *One very satisfying kick* (although she did nearly fall over) and now they were both disarmed, fighting hand to hand. Faster, angrier, more brutal, so close now they could feel each other’s breath. And then Satsuki got Ryuko into a vicious armbar:

“You like that! Do you! You -,”

But then Ryuko twisted her whole body around, dislocating her shoulder to grab Satsuki’s neck. Usually watching Ryuko hurt herself unnaturally seemed to do something unspeakable to Satsuki’s mind, now it was... breathtaking. Literally too. So she pushed herself off the ground and twisted herself so her back was arched and Ryuko had no choice but to let her go, and now they

were wrestling on the ground. And finally, after they'd been sufficiently spattered in dirt and leaves and grass, Satsuki's breath finally failed, and the edges of her vision went dark.

She went on as long as she could though, barely realizing how desperate she was to keep going until Ryuko was on top of her, triumph burning in her eyes, and then her lips were on Satsuki's, her hands pinning her wrists. That softness, every minute detail was all Satsuki could even perceive. And when they parted Satsuki tried to lean back in for another kiss but Ryuko just smirked and said,

"I win."

And the little pinprick of anger made her want to shout back – *cocky superhuman bitch* – but she had to just sit there and catch her breath.

And as she lay there lightheaded Satsuki convinced herself that she felt quite sober, and was disappointed. And yet her thoughts spilled out her mouth.

"Ohhh that was *wonderful*. I-I didn't know, but this. *This* is what I've been looking forward to all night. Thank you."

"Thank you?"

~~~~~

"Oof, girl you're heavy!" Ryuko commented, quite casual as though whatever they'd just done hadn't happened at all. Satsuki, still lightheaded, leaned on her shoulder. "You sure you're good?"

"I feel like I'm floating..."

"Damn, you really are a lightweight, aint'cha?"

"No it's just the," Satsuki paused for a yawn, "the excess of aerobic exercise accelerates metabolism, causing a momentary spike in blood alcohol content. Momentary."

"Whatever you say Sats, whatever you say."

They climbed the steps to the sliding glass door together, but when they got there Ryuko stopped them and turned around "Let's survey the damage now, huh?"

Satsuki's mouth dropped when they did. Two roughly human shaped craters in the grass, footprints all over everything. The fire was burnt out and the crumbled charcoal scattered on the patio, the lawn chairs flipped, branches snapped off, even the shinai had somehow been smashed in the chaos.

"How am I going to-,"

"Tomorrow problem."

"What ever you say, love, whatever you say."

And even though Satsuki thought that she'd gotten to what the night was building to, as Ryuko and her settled into bed, she thoughtlessly reached for her body in a way she could never

bring herself to normally. Thoughtlessly. The way Ryuko did. And she kept not thinking, and time seemed to stretch to infinity. Just a stream of that heavenly voice begging her for more. Everything was a blur, but it was *good*. And maybe it wasn't so bad to turn her thinking off, if this is what she got in for it.

Satsuki was very, very glad she didn't black out that night. Or have to pretend she had, for that matter. Ryuko has to agree, but really what was there to say? She thought Satsuki would find it incredibly tacky if she said that sometimes fantasies really do come true.

## Chapter End Notes

I've noticed sometimes in these chapters I tend to focus perspective on Satsuki. Not always, but plenty of the time. Oftentimes to me Ryuko simply does the first thing that comes to mind, so eventually it becomes more useful to focus on Satsuki because she isn't so easy to read. I haven't learned yet how to split perspective between two characters properly. Seems like a very advanced novelist trick to me, but I'll keep trying



# Ring of Fire: Nonon's Family: 1

## Chapter Summary

Apologies for this being late. I want this next series to sort of function like a one-off with a one-off OC, and it was going to be one chapter but it's getting too long so I split them. I'm busy coming up so if I fall behind my regular schedule some more don't say I didn't warn you.

January 2067

~~~~~

“Alright kid, you know the plan?”

“Take my time getting in, pop the USB in the main computer, keep my head down while you guys blast ‘em,” Mataro answered with a smirk. He was dressed in ratty plainclothes, long hair unbraided and draped over his face so nobody could see his blindfold (which was also getting pretty ratty at this point). With the tan he’d built over months in the tropics and that getup he could pass for one of the locals who’d been enslaved to build for REVOCS. Which was exactly the idea.

“Remember, if it comes down to blowing your cover or... doing what’s necessary,” Tsumugu nodded as he handed over the USB drive that would hack the obelisk’s security, and Aikuro passed him a hardened life-fiber knife, “Don’t hesitate. A moment is all they need to start executing hostages.” They’d made that mistake before. Turned out charging in headlong with Kamui wasn’t as easy as it looked, not when there was collateral damage to consider.

So Mataro would go in first and make a distraction. Which is what he did now, vanishing into the underbrush in the direction of the vast, jagged metal edifice that rose over a nearby hill. On the way he popped one of his emergency tabs into the back corner of his mouth where he could easily crush it between his teeth if needed.

It wasn’t long before the alarm klaxons started. Mataro had done his job. Within less than a fraction of a second Aikuro and Tsumugu were in motion – no, gone – blurs tearing up the rainforest, slicing through the reinforced concrete of the outer barricade instantaneously. REVOCS cultists and shed life-fibers fell in a rain, and then, before the guards on the second wall could react, phase two.

A torrent of needles and rockets tearing out from the forest, a tide of men and women in captured Ultima Uniforms with a vanguard of DTRs bounding ahead, a flight of VTOLs strafing overhead. And Aikuro paused on the battlements as his army walked past and bullets bounced harmlessly off Nekketsu, all but humming to himself as he picked off tougher targets, two-stars and such, with perfect precision.

Now this was a good scrum. Aikuro’s boys surging through the breach behind him were ragged, wearing muddy camo fatigues over their swiped life-fibers, DTRs painted with garish warpaint. Against the sleek, corporate REVOCS designs with their shaped armor and unified,

intimidating color scheme of white, black, and glowing red-purple. It was just like Nudist Beach. This is what Aikuro was trained for, and no matter how many years passed he could never say no to a good old-fashioned surprise attack.

Especially not with Nekketsu here to help. [*Look, there he is!*] She shouted as the door to the main bunker around the base of the obelisk wrenched off its hinges Mataro had locked them to stop the soldiers inside from reinforcing their comrades, but that didn't matter to the man who strode out. At first glance he didn't even look like a man in armor, but instead a small mecha similar to a miniature honnouji defcon machine. With a great round body of solid plate interwoven with neon life-fiber bands and thick metal limbs ending in hardened life-fiber talons, the only non-mechanical portion of the ensemble was the face of a huge man with an eyepatch and a lumpy jawline jutting out from all those layers of armor. His one remaining eye locked onto Aikuro with a flash of rage.

"Oh! Tolstoy! Been a minute!" Aikuro called out to him.

"That's not my name!" The commander in his three-star ultima uniform shouted back in a thick Russian accent. This commander, as far as Aikuro could tell, wasn't a true believer but a mercenary – and though that made him stupid it also meant he would talk to you. He'd scrapped with Aikuro weeks before, in fact him and Kamui Rosuketsu were the only ones that had gotten out of an encounter with the Kamui Corps alive. "So we meet again, Mikisuki! But it won't be so easy this time! I've improved my *Cataphract* model three-star ultima uniform! Its armor is so thick your arrows *cannot* pierce it!"

"Is that so," Aikuro cracked his knuckles, "Well then, I guess we'll have to settle this face to fa-,"

At this point Tsumugu crashed into the mercenary with a shield bash that sent him flying.

"Ooh! Sorry about that!" Aikuro leapt off the battlements and fell upon his adversary with his bow converted into blade form. "You know him, he likes to skip the banter and get *right* to the chase!"

This duel was the most important thing happening on the battlefield. Either side in it was more than capable of shattering the entire rest of the enemy army – if they didn't have someone else powerful to deal with. So while they kept each other busy, the more ordinary soldiers were able to slug it out.

And a three-star uniform wasn't hardly as far below a Kamui as raw power would suggest, especially not with a competent warrior controlling it. Sure in terms of strength the *Cataphract* model wouldn't stand a chance, but that's the thing about three-stars, even back at Honnouji – they were tricky. In this case the trick was a body that, despite looking like rigid armor, was surprisingly pliable. An arm would become a leg, armor would cave in to warp around a thrust, and so this bulky looking uniform could twist and tumble like some kind of giant gyroscope. Which was good because today he was outmatched and had to play a careful game of keep-away with the two raging Kamui.

That was, until he spotted a small, drab figure scrambling across the battlefield, being chased by a squad of REVOCS soldiers. It was Mataro – apparently, he'd been spotted trying to get out of the bunker. Now the Russian mercenary lunged for him with talons outstretched.

“Shit. Kid!” Aikuro yelled, but it turned out there was nothing to fear. Mataro suddenly dropped flat to the ground, and those slicing claws flew by well overhead. Then he rolled, kicked up onto his feet, and was running again. And as the three-star bounced and skidded across the sandy battlefield, Tsumugu leapt over him and pinned him to the ground, sword pointing at his exposed head. Mataro had unexpectedly handed him a golden opportunity.

“We know you’re not one of them. Just surrender, and you will be treated fairly.”

“Yeah, if it’s money you’re after we’ll double whatever REVOCS signed you on for.”

In his current position they must’ve thought he had no choice but to surrender, but instead the mercenary grunted, looking up to the sky, “Sorry boys, but I’ve got to keep some standards.” Almost immediately, one of the VTOLs exploded, and Aikuro and Tsumugu both jerked their heads up. Enemy air support? “I am a professional, after all.”

And indeed it was enemy air support. A squadron of some kind of sleek flyer, dancing acrobatically around the height of the obelisk. Aikuro immediately pegged two with arrows through the cockpits, but the others seemed to be able to evade targeting. Some of them were landing, dropping off more soldiers.

Aikuro had seen these before. Life-fiber powered machines, fast and agile and capable of regenerating. Frankly, Tolstoy could wait. He leapt into the air, shooting down two more as he flew, and landed amongst the fresh soldiers, carving into them before they could attack his worn out, tired boys.

But then he wished he hadn’t when one of them landed in front of the mercenary and, with Tsumugu also distracted, he climbed on.

“Special extraction courtesy of Commander Jakuzure, sir!” A man on that chopper called as it lifted off, and Aikuro did a double take so sudden that a cultist in a one-star actually managed to get a punch on him (didn’t hurt, but still).

*[Wait, did he just say]*

“Hold on, what did you -,”

The mercenary sneered as he floated away from the battlefield. “That’s right. Tell Nonon her brother sends his regards.”

The fight wrapped up quickly after that. Without anyone strong enough to oppose the Kamui, all that was left was to surrender or die. Running wasn’t even an option, anyone attempting to flee into the forest was cut down as they loped around securing the perimeter.

When all was done, they found Mataro chilling with Yuda. Or trying to anyway, he seemed to be... vibrating. He didn’t look very good, skin sparkling with sweat, hair rank and glistening. But he was smiling.

“Kid, you alright?” Aikuro asked, and Mataro nodded very quickly.

“YessirMrMikisukisir!”

“That was some trick you pulled back there. Thought you wouldn’t see him coming.”

“No! I took one of those those-uh-pill things Shiro gave me.”

Tsumugu appraised him very seriously, putting a finger on the side of his neck briefly to feel his pulse. Racing. “How do you feel?”

“Fast.”

Aikuro and Tsumugu shared a look, and their Kamui a short conversation about what Shiro had told them the pills would do. “You did only take one, right?”

Mataro kept nodding – he didn’t seem to be able to stop, “Yep! Shiro said take one right when you need don’t let anyone else have one so that’s what I did and they *really* work.”

“Alright,” Tsumugu nodded, “Good work. You’re going crash soon so get on a dropship before that happens.”

When Mataro was out of earshot, Yuda said to them, “Look I’m not saying it doesn’t work but do you really think you should be giving a kid that young coke?”

Tsumugu shook his head, “It’s not cocaine. It’s life-fibers.”

“... come again?”

“His family is extremely life-fiber compatible,” Aikuro continued. “If you put life-fibers in his bloodstream it will force them to momentarily treat him as a host in order to keep him alive. It’s like temporarily making him into what Ryuko is. A human life-fiber hybrid.”

“Holy shit, you’re serious?”

“But enough about that, Aikuro did you hear what they said about Nonon’s brother?”

Aikuro responded enthusiastically, “I know, right? I thought he was on house arrest on a remote island someplace?”

“Apparently they snuck him out. He wasn’t associated with REVOCS before, right?”

“No, or he’d’ve been under much stronger security.”

“Wait, hold on, who’s this now?”

“Nonon’s older brother. He was supposed to be the heir to the family, but when Ryuko killed Ragyo and Satsuki took over their tech conglomerate was one of the first mega-corps they broke up. They’ve never been on good terms but Satsuki still ensured his life would be comfortable enough.”

“And just for that he signed with REVOCS? Petty.”

“You got that right. Nonon thinks he’s a real prick.”

“Speaking of, you wanna tell her or...” Tsumugu asked.

Aikuro laughed, “Are you kidding? I gotta at least be there. It’s gonna be a sight to see.”



## Ring of Fire: Nonon's Family: 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 2067

~~~~~

“Nice job making it up here kid,” Aikuro said as Mataro scrambled over the guardrail onto the roof of a tall skyscraper on which Aikuro, Tsumugu, Uzu, Nonon, and Yuda were lounging under a canopy. The rain was coming down warm and not at all unpleasant, except for how acidic it was. Most rain these days was acidic, but a confluence of weather patterns made the rain of Old Jakarta, the former capital, particularly bad. But people still lived here, even through the streets below were flooded now, transforming the gridlock into a city of canals. The warrens down below were so deep REVOCS hadn’t managed to flush everyone out, and now they wouldn’t have a chance. The Kamui Corps had liberated the city just that morning.

The smoke from the shattered planes and warships was still contributing to the evening gloom.

“I just... wanted to see... if you needed anything...” Mataro wheezed as he caught his breath.

“Got everything we need right here, little tiger,” Yuda said, lovingly tapping a bottle of vodka.

Uzu stood up and offered Mataro his lawn chair and went over to Nonon’s

“What, are you joking?” Nonon thought she was already making a huge concession by letting Yuda celebrate with them (not that she didn’t like him, but subordinates shouldn’t see her relax). And now this?

“Yeah, make room, c’mon,” Uzu replied and Nonon, begrudgingly, complied. She scooted over and eventually partially onto Uzu’s lap so there was enough space (it was tough because their Kamui were both still powered on, as were Aikuro’s and Tsumugu’s), and Mataro sat down.

“You seen this shit?” Nonon pointed a large billboard screen on a nearby skyscraper. A man Mataro didn’t recognize was projected on it, standing in a gilded suit before a giant light display that just said “REVOCS”. He had a face that was angular, smooth, and symmetric, like a shark, but with huge scars across one side and... no jaw. An unsettling metal mandible was put in its place, looking like little more than a reconstruction of the underlying bone and teeth, with weird cross-stitching of rainbow light, like Nui’s reconstructed arms after Ryuko chopped them off. “That’s Takamori Kiryuin, Satsuki’s cousin. And, come to think of it, technically your cousin. Since you guys ‘adopted’ her or whatever,” She added snidely.

“No shit. I thought Ryuko said this dude got shot.”

“He did. Hence the... you see,” She waved at her own chin to demonstrate.

This was a propaganda video that REVOCS had put up when they realized that they weren't going to be able to forcibly evict the people hiding in the city's maze of canals. It was running on loop: ~"Look around you, good people,"~ His synthesized voice rang out, about as impassioned as a machine could be, ~"The world is winding down. We have mined and devoured and *consumed* everything our good mother Earth gave us. Oh, it's not our *fault*, it's just... the evil of human nature. We must be strong now, and that is exactly what REVOCS means to do. We are creating a great ark, in which our *chosen* can weather the storm. Well, is that not cruel of us, you might ask. To leave the rest of you to die. But the doors to the ark are still open, open to any who will join us and *pull their weight*. So come, join us in the light."~

"Booooo!" Uzu shouted, whipping a glass at the screen with Kamui strength so it actually made it several blocks down to shatter with a little puff of smoke on the screen.

"Don't waste those!" Nonon hissed, "What kind of example are you setting!" But in the street below people who heard him (and there were a lot of people who'd come out specifically to see the Kamui) aped him and started booing and throwing things as well.

"Heh, the doors are open. If anyone think their ark is gonna do anything but sink and take the rest of us down with it, speak now," Aikuro said. Nobody responded except Tsumugu's cynical chuckle.

The recording went on, ~"If I may appeal to your... baser practicality... where else is there to turn? To *Satsuki*?"~ Takamori seemed like he would've scoffed if the simulated voice allowed it, ~"She once believed in the power of strength, and perhaps she still does. But this talk of... peace and prosperity for all. It's nothing more than talk. The sad truth,"~ An artificial sigh emanated from his speakers, ~"It's no longer possible. Such utopian promises were never possible. And look at what she does, not what she says. She says life-fibers are evil, yet has Kamui at her disposal, just the same as us. Vast power and political position for her friends, leeching off the good name of the great Ryuko Matoi? And well, you see how she treats her enemies. The doors to her ark are *closed*,"~ He held his jaw, jerking it to the side to mimic the motion of being shot.

"Ohh!" Yuda reacted quite viscerally to that, "How can he talk like this and not expect us to see right through it?"

"Oh, most people will," Tsumugu answered, "The point isn't really to get new believers. But if he can instill doubt that they have anything to do with Ragyo's plans? If they can make people think that *maybe* this isn't a good versus evil battle but just a power struggle between two morally ambiguous geopolitical entities. Most of the world, surprisingly enough, wasn't at Honnouji. They don't know for sure what went down, so if he tells them *maybe* Satsuki made an opportunistic power grab during the aftermath of Ryuko saving the world... all he wants is to instill some doubt."

"Ahhh, devious."

"And to think, my own fucking brother got bought in by that."

There was such venom in her voice that nobody felt much like responding, so she looked around and shrugged, as if confused why that would be, "What? He's a fat fucking crook, a parasite! And of course, they didn't give him this pitch, they gave him the *real* one."

"What do you suppose they wanted him for, anyway?"

“If he didn’t reach out to them because we took away his fifty yachts and his compound in Fiji? I thought about it and probably it’s a PR victory, getting my brother just like they got Satsuki’s cousins. Also, to get under my skin, probably.”

Tsumugu eyed her skeptically

“Which did work, I’ll admit. And besides, him and this fuck were probably friends! You know, hobnobbing at the balls, and the country clubs, and all that. I-I mean I did that too, but that was different, you actually think I liked any of those bougie cunts? No, I did it all for Satsuki, and then she – ahem – uh...” Only Yuda out of all of them didn’t know that there was some falling out between Satsuki recently (he just assumed she’d already been drinking a bit). Everyone’s eyes were on her, “Yeah, gets under my skin alright.”

“Well, I think we’ve seen enough of that,” Aikuro decided, “Izanami! I know you’re listening in. Hack in there and change the channel.”

Almost immediately the screen cut out with a loud electronic sparkling noise. A brief animation of Izanami’s human avatar playfully saluting played, and then the feed cut to video from the training arena in the research complex – a duel between Houka and Ryuko. Graceful fencing on Houka’s end, with precise rapiers and his lanky, gymnastic limbs. Ryuko just had that hardened life-fiber pole, and today she chose to use it like a stick, not a sword. The people down in the streets cheered.

“That’s more like it! Now we can drink,” Yuda cracked open the vodka bottle and began to pour. He and Aikuro and Tsumugu took theirs like champs, of course, and Uzu grimaced, pulled a face, and loudly yelled, “Woooo!”. Nonon, feeling like everyone’s eyes were on her, forced hers down with a stoic face too. And then it came to Mataro.

All the adults shared glances, while Mataro feigned nonchalance (easier with his blindfold).

“Well, we’re all here.”

“Just make sure he doesn’t fall off the side or something, huh?”

But in the end it came to Nonon to make the decision. Uzu had already smashed his glass so they were sharing, but she held it out anyway.

“Hey kid. You catch it, you get some.”

Mataro’s head jerked up as the shot glass whistled through the air, glinting in the hazy evening light. It wasn’t but a minute before Mataro’s hand shot out and he let it roll down his arm neatly. Uzu’s eyebrows shot up.

There was a smattering of applause as Uzu poured out his reward. But when Mataro drank it, you could see his eyes bugging out from under the blindfold and it all came spewing back up.

“Hah! Bitch,” Nonon smirked. But she didn’t stop Uzu from pouring him another shot, which he did keep down.

~~~~~



The evening wore on, and eventually Tsumugu, Aikuro, and Yuda went down to be with their boys, and it was just Nonon, Uzu, and Mataro still up there, watching replay of the greatest hits of Kamui training and drinking. Uzu had half a mind to send Mataro to bed so he could be alone with Nonon, but she hadn't decided to play along. Not yet, she was in a very specific sort of mood since hearing about her brother. Times like these even Mataro needed a little leeway. Plus, by this point, everyone was getting kind of sleepy. Moving or doing anything much seemed hard.

And it wasn't like they weren't having a good conversation too, which kept Uzu from pushing the issue. "So, what about you and that girl you rescued, eh?" Nonon asked, "Any luck there?"

"What, are you nuts? We don't even speak the same language! Nah, I'll just wait 'til I'm back in Japan, get back on Tinder."

"So you say, my squire, so you say..." Uzu murmured philosophically. He was on the screen at that moment, a bout between him and Rei. Mataro, though not nearly as drunk as the others since they'd cut him off, was still mesmerized by the lightning fast dance of their blades, the way their bodies and those huge Kamui eyes twisted and turned as though they had their own laws of physics. Plus, the privilege of hanging out so cordially with these... heroes, he had never enjoyed himself more.

"God, that is so fucking cool."

"It's not all it's cracked up to be, you know" Nonon said, but when Mataro looked at her skeptically she cracked up, "Oh, who am I kidding? It's better."

"Got that right," Uzu chuckled and Mataro did too.

"Like, look at this place," Nonon spread her hands expansively. The smoke was still rising into the black night. A crashed plane happened to be sticking out of the skyscraper right in front of them like a giant steel cigar. "Fucking chaos, death, danger everywhere. I mean it's chilled out now, but you should've seen it this morning."

"I've seen plenty of action."

"I know, I know you have," Nonon said with a surprising lack of condescension. "But it's not the same. This is like a day in the park to us. You have no idea what a load off the mind that is."

"The world is unlocked to us," Uzu added.

"Like, seriously, look at it!" Nonon insisted, rising from Uzu's lap and acting like she was going to grab his head by the sides and force him to look, but then she noticed the blindfold. "Or feel, or whatever. How long you gonna keep this thing on anyway? Planning a dramatic reveal?"

Mataro shrugged, "As long as until Satsuki says. She's the master, I'm merely the apprentice. I mean, I could just ask Ryuko to go around her and make me a Kamui and then I wouldn't need her but why would I do that? She probably wouldn't, anyway."

"Heh. No, she would not."

"I didn't think so, but y'know maybe one day..."

“... Mmm... honestly you probably will eventually. Your own Kamui”

“Oh. Cool.” Hearing Nonon acknowledge that filled him with a glow of joy, but he decided to play it cool. He desperately wanted to not mess this up

They watched the duel in silence for a moment, until Nonon abruptly said, “They’re fucking each other, you know that?”

“Wait, who?”

“Nonon!” Uzu gasped

“Your sisters, that’s who. Adopted sisters, whatever.”

Uzu immediately sprung into damage control, “Now hold on. Mataro, this is just a rumor, you understand that, right?”

“Nuh-uh! I *asked* her. Right from the lady herself.”

“... Whoa.”

“Yeah. Let *that* one sink in, if you can. And you,” she turned to Mataro, “This it? That’s your reaction.”

Mataro shrugged.

“But they’re *sisters*!”

“Yeah, they’re *my* sisters. And they didn’t know each other growing up. And I know what that was like for both of them. Mako told me everything.”

“Seriously.”

“I have no business judging them. And I don’t want to.”

“... Un-fucking-believable.”

[*Nonon, don’t get carried away now.*] Saiban cut in, feeling a rise of anger in her. But, under the weight of alcohol and the new tension she could feel in Uzu (which she did feel a little guilty about creating), it collapsed.

“I’m not gonna Saiban.”

“Huh?”

“It’s just Saiban, telling me not to flip out and pitch you off this roof.”

“Eeep,” Mataro just now realized that was a possibility.

“I thought you’d be used to that from Senketsu.”

“It was so long ago... I do kinda miss it, I guess.”

“I always thought it would be kind of annoying. Like someone always being on the phone.”

“Oh at first, sure. But then you kinda get used to the chatter. They were always arguing but... you could tell it was because he cared. He was looking out for her.”

“...Huh”

“Satsuki’s the only person who cares about Ryuko *that* much. She tutored her to get her to graduate high school, did you know that?”

“No, actually.”

“Ryuko always acts tough and cool around her girlfriends, but not Satsuki. She can’t play tough with Satsuki. I think it annoys her. But then you see the side of her she doesn’t normally show.”

“Like with Senketsu?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve got a bit of a crush on Ryuko too, I know. You sure that’s not fucking up your... judgment or whatever.”

Uzu suddenly cut in, “-wait, did Ryuko know Satsuki was gay before this, because we didn’t know for years and – Oh, right, thanks Seijistu,” Nonon waited to see if he’d say anything more but he seemed to be more interested in talking to his Kamui instead, mumbling almost inaudibly.

“You. Crush. Talk.”

“I-I mean yeah, but like, obviously I didn’t ever think that would go anywhere I – Look I know what I am. I’m just a punk kid and she’s... awesome, what do you expect?”

“Sure, sure. It’s just you never look at Satsuki that way. Or me.”

“Satsuki I’m still half afraid’ll kill me. And you, well, I don’t see how I could look at you any way with this blindfold, so who’s to say?”

“Heh, thanks.”

“This fuckin’ shit... this is why you don’t talk to her anymore, isn’t it?”

“Yup. And I’m gonna keep not talking to her until...”

“Until what?”

“She stops, or gets better, or something.”

“I don’t know Nonon, I just want them to be happy. I *wanted* Mako and Ryuko to stay together, you know. But they don’t need to be together to still be close, I guess. Maybe this is the next best thing?”

“... You’re a pretty stupid kid, you know that?”

“I’m just trying to be a good brother.”

## Chapter End Notes

Short update: gonna have to skip this week, it’s turning into a busy one in my real life. So expect the next chapter next weekend or so I think. Sorry!

# Ring of Fire: Nonon's Family: 3

## Chapter Summary

Well this took a second. Aside from real life difficulties, this one turned out to be quite difficult to write. The idea of having it be partially from Uzu's perspective was the final piece I needed. Still, it's a tricky one and I hope I did a good job getting the point across

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February 2067

~~~~~

What was it Uzu liked so much about Nonon anyway? It wasn't a question he was used to asking. Much less since Seijitsu came around – to her Nonon was just part of the background of life. Or more fittingly Saiban was part of her life, there wasn't really a word for that close bond between Kamui, there'd never been one like it before. Asking what they liked about each other wasn't bound to get an answer a human understood it was just a... resonance.

But Nonon, right. Besides the obvious. Well, the obvious was pretty important: There was nothing much better than fighting alongside a woman who loved the art almost as much as he did and thought he looked good doing what he did best. The only thing better was, well, he'd been with a lot more woman than he would ever admit to her – especially during his diplomatic voyage to Europe and America, back when the victory was fresh and he couldn't keep them off him. So he had a lot of context to say she was good, *scary* good. Like, honestly worrying that she might go more rounds than him good. So there was that.

But it wasn't always like this. Used to be there was only one woman for him – Satsuki. There was no denying she had the greatest body known to science, as well as being the only human warrior who'd ever posed a real challenge to him (Ragyo and Ryuko didn't count or he'd have to own that with Ryuko's recent improvements she might be able to match him in more ways than the purely physical one day). Satsuki was like a mountain – before he found out she wasn't interested in men climbing that mountain was about the ultimate achievement he could envision. So what happened?

Well, he unlocked Shingantsu. That was when he learned that all those little twitches and tells he'd always picked up with Tenguantsu weren't just isolated things, they all came together into a sort of rhythm, a flow to how people and creatures moved. No matter what they were doing, or their mood, there was a distinct personality to how each person moved. The languid precision of Houka, Ira's coiled spring that surged from hulking standstill in an instant, Ryuko's defiant, twitching calm that hid catlike readiness, Mako's skittish overexcitement. And then Satsuki's... nothing. Whatever training she had as a child had done it's job, Uzu was convinced that the poise with which she regularly held herself was nothing more than an act. He'd never seen her real

rhythm and that bothered him. Normal people couldn't fake the natural rhythm of their movements.

He had to wonder now if Ryuko had ever seen her inner self, now that Nonon had confirmed good enough for him that her worst suspicions were right. There'd always been something between them, maybe with Ryuko she could let her guard down.

But none of Satsuki's deficiencies made any difference when compared to the pure brightness of Nonon. He'd never seen anything like it, there was precision and then there was skipping every step, dainty hands tapping to a beat only she could hear, slender back perfectly arched like a ballerina. It was amazing, really, and though at first he wrote it off as just a neat curiosity, over the months he started to realize that the tape measure length around a woman's breasts or hips was nothing compared to this. Of course, she didn't have to be such a brat about realizing she had his attention.

Lately though, since they'd started winning the war in Indonesia, her body's rhythm had begun to change. That arched back began to lean into her pace, those steps drove into the ground with greater force. Her head began to tilt not with that dainty, musical twitch but with a smooth glare. This was new, predatory, didn't really feel like anyone Uzu had ever encountered before, least of all in Nonon herself. The successful campaign, the bloodshed, the life-fibers Saiban was gorging on, it was filling her with something more than confidence.

Still, he didn't really spend any time thinking about all this.

At least, not until the day she killed Chimoku Jakuzure.

~~~~~

It was a day like any other when it happened, a regular raid on a city, an enemy base smashed. Then there was an electrical plant with a great big skyscraper across the river that the survivors were holed up in, and the Kamui had to leap across to get to them before they could regroup with reinforcements. There were a lot of those life-fiber powered aircraft buzzing around that day, more than Uzu had ever seen.

He knew the moment it happened. Nonon froze, right in the middle of the battle in a big open yard surrounding by crackling, sparking pylons that stood half shattered and on fire. Across from her, silhouetted in the fire raging around the foot of the skyscraper, was a short, thin man in what was undoubtedly an Ultima Uniform.

Uzu landed next to her, cape whooshing as it transformed back into its normal form from wings. "Let me take this one," He urged softly.

Nonon shook her head.

"Together then? Make it quick?"

She looked at Uzu then. A fire was in her eyes, "Go stop the reinforcements. Main road. We're just about done here."

He could do nothing but turn reflexively and start to walk off, *[Wait, shit!]* Seijitsu suddenly remembered, *[Nekketsu and Reiketsu, they said we should be stopping this!]*. They'd all discussed

this before, and the inevitable conclusion was that if Nonon came upon this brother who seemed to agitate her so much she might do something drastic.

But she was their commanding officer and as much as it was their duty as friends to try to talk her out of something she might later regret, that was the limit of their authority. And much as it was weird to admit she was rarely wrong – Satsuki’s strategic mindset had clearly rubbed off on her – so if she said he had to go that would probably be the right call. Not that they cared much about him, he sided with the enemy so that made him the enemy, but it just didn’t seem like a good idea to let a family tragedy play out in front of them.

Uzu didn’t get it. They’d talked about Nonon’s family before and she didn’t seem to care much about them either way.

~~~~~

Why couldn’t he just have never showed up? Why couldn’t the whole thing blow over? She knew it wouldn’t from the moment Aikuro first told her, that somehow it would lead to this. Even so, neither Nonon nor Saiban had come up with a plan, they’d just been dreading it for weeks. And now it was here, the inevitable confrontation with the elder Jakuzure, the so-called rightful heir.

*[I wonder if this is how Satsuki felt right before she betrayed Ragyo.]*

“No, Satsuki planned to die that day. At least we know he can’t kill us,” Nonon murmured softly, audible only to Saiban over the roar of fire and battle.

*[Well, I guess one way or another it’ll be over soon then, you can take solace in that]* Saiban said, although neither of them felt particularly consoled.

“You can come out now, I know it’s you!”

“What, not even a hello?” The man who emerged from the flames seemed to trail long, straight life-fibers out into the surroundings, as though caught in a spider web. His Ultima Uniform might have been in the powered-down form most of them took, a three piece suit in the REVOCS red-purple and black, but it was clearly still active, doing something.

Nonon huffed. “Chimoku,” She said in a cold voice. Now that Uzu could see him better he was struck by how... ordinary this guy was. He was much thinner than expected from Nonon’s fuming, but that didn’t mean he was particularly good looking either. Like Nonon he was short and pale and had delicate, soft facial features with big, sharp eyes. But where all that worked wonders for his girlfriend, commander, fellow Kamui bearer, on her brother with his brown eyes and perfectly ordinary black hair it made him look... quite frail. Especially that pale skin – with his sharp eyes Uzu could see his veins. It made his skin look weirdly wet, and made Seijitsu wonder what he’d been doing to spend a bit more than a month down in the tropics and not pick up a tan.

“Sister,” He said in a thin voice, “To think I’d have to come to this... godforsaken place to see you.”

“Yeah. Well. You found me. You, ah, you might as well surrender now.”

Chimoku shook his head and said smugly, “I can’t do that, sister.”

*“Wha – you –,” You can’t be serious. He must know a lone three-star operated by a **non-combattant** won’t last a minute against us. I’m sure he thinks he’s got a trick or something but -*

But she didn’t want to fight him. “You’ve lost the battle. You’re going to have to surrender.”

“I don’t think so. Not until I say what I have to say.”

*What the fuck does he think he’s got on me that this isn’t suicide! He thinks I’m seriously going to stand here and listen while he says... what?* Nonon desperately wanted to know.

She looked to Uzu for guidance, but he was standing there transfixed. With his senses he noticed something Nonon didn’t. Chimoku’s hands were shaking, the corners of his mouth drawn, twitching. His rhythm was cagey, a slow burn of anger. Nonon was, by comparison, much less agitated than him. Although still plenty agitated.

*[What do we do here?]* Saiban was looking back through Nonon’s memories of her brother, trying to find an answer that would resolve this without it coming to blows. There... weren’t many. Him pulling her abnormal pink hair when she was a toddler and he in grade school, calling her a freak while their parents looked the other way. Some birthday parties and holidays... no, those were memories of Satsuki, or Shiro. *[What could he have to say? You’ve basically avoided each other since you met Satsuki and Shiro].*

“Well then, I have to remove your Ultima Uniform by force.”

“I know-,”

“-Ok,” Nonon had enough, and with a light jump zoomed directly towards him. But she’d barely made it halfway before those trailing threads lit up and suddenly the sparking electrical pylons were alive, moving. Collapsing on her from all directions.

Nonon sliced through the first pylon and jumped neatly over the second. But a tangle of wires caught her on the third, wrapping her in a cocoon that crackled with blinding flashes. Chimoku grimaced as he held his hands up, motioning the cocoon to tighten. But they were mere metal, and Nonon ripped herself free as though wholly unencumbered.

Chimoku laughed nervously, “Did you really think it would be that easy? You don’t know the effort it took to be here! Not just anyone can wear this *Medjay* Model Three-Star Ultima Uniform, a year ago my body would have crumpled under the pressure! But I did it, all so I could come here and get some answers!”

“What fucking answers? How did you do that, anyway?” Nonon growled, landing on the ground and stalking forward. A few more pieces of the electrical plant whipped towards her – now she could see that the life-fibers extending from her brother were merging with the wires somehow. She cut them out of the air easily. A flight of those life-fiber powered flyers, sleek things with glowing lights from inside their bellies, had pulled up and were hovering overhead.

“Well, why did you betray us?”

“...What?”



“We had it all Nonon! Our family were the last ones standing, the biggest megacorp left after Satsuki took down the Takaradas and Ragyo bit it! Why couldn’t you have just stopped there!”

“Are you serious? You guys had slaves in sweatshops!” Nonon was close enough now to rush the last of the distance to him, but a wall of blazing metal slammed together in front of her, buy him just enough time to dart away. When Nonon caught up to him, slashing down right onto his head, he blocked at her arm – which absolutely shocked her, since when did he know how to fight?

“That never bothered you before! Since when do you care?” Chimoku nimbly dodged several more slashes while backpedaling to the base of the skyscraper.

“Fuck you! I’m not a monster, I care about people!”

“Yeah right. You’re head’s just full of bullshit that closet communist Satsuki Kiryuin’s fed you!”

“She’s not a communist!”

“Isn’t she?” Chimoku pulled up, and as he did one of the aircraft dropped from the sky right behind him, opening up on Nonon with from high caliber machineguns that might not have done any damage but knocked her back. As she flipped and landed on her feet some yards back, the whole thing pulsed with red light and all those trailing threads whirled about and latched onto the aircraft’s hull, melting into it, slowly taking more of the Ultima Uniform until Chimoku stood there, practically naked. Then the whole thing started reforming around him, the hull reshaping into a giant metallic body, lanky and agile with a synthetic-smooth surface. Rotors became great wings, the cockpit slammed over him like a giant mask, and a mech some twenty feet tall now loomed over Nonon.

“-What the-” She gasped.

“*This* is my Ultima Uniform. The *Medjay* special applications model! With it, I can interface with anything electronic – computers, vehicles, whatever. I can merge them with my life-fibers to create super powerful, regenerating superweapons!”

“Hold on, you’re the one making all these weird buzzy jets?” (She and Uzu had taken to calling them “buzzers” but the phrase hadn’t really caught on yet).

“I’ve always had a soft spot for mechanics, sis, didn’t you know?”

“Why would I know something like -,” Nonon said, but then it hit her as Saiban trawled through her memories – that was the truth. She had never even conceived that he might have any interests beyond his own indolence.

“Do you know why I chose this place for our meeting?” Chimoku seemed to have gained some confidence now that he was fully transformed, but he still kept more than a full lunge away from Nonon as they squared off once more, “It’s an *electrical plant*. Everything around here is a tool for me, the very ground beneath you is a weapon against you!” Illustratively, life fibers leapt from the outstretched fingers of the *Medjay* and into the ground, and wires and cables erupted up in flashes of blue light to try to ensnare Nonon, but she was already moving, leaping at him. But the

mech's claws were hardened, capable of blocking her naginata's blade. "On my own I would never stand a chance, but here. Here I will defeat you and avenge our family!"

"Bullshit! You're just mad because we took your money away!"

Chimoku chuckled, "And you say your precious Kiryuin isn't a communist. Wake up, stupid! All the great families are gone! Everyone worth a damn is either in jail or god knows where, and *the masses* run everything now! What else would you call it! All of our people are gone, and soon society will go with them!"

"That's not true!"

"And you know what's the worst thing? We'd probably have been alright if it weren't for *you*. The Jakuzures were the last men standing, even with all Satsuki takes we had enough to be left with *something*, but just because you wanted to be in charge all of a sudden we're all arrested! Banished!"

"House arrest!"

"House arrest on a tiny island in the middle of the ocean? You might as well have thrown us in jail where you think we belong!"

"You think I had anything to do with that?"

"I know you did!"

"You think I cared what happened to you? We saved the fucking *world*!"

"Yeah? And now you're going to destroy it! And besides, Ryuko was the one who saved the world, not you!"

"Oh *fuck you*! You don't know a damn thing about us!" Nonon finally managed to get in a slash, cutting through the outer armor to reveal the inner circuitry.

"I know you abandoned us! I know Satsuki, for almost as long as you have! What, tell me, what does she have that we didn't? Your *family*?"

*What does she have? She cares about me! She's got vision! She's got the will to make it happen!-*

*-but not enough will to keep from fucking her sister-*

*-but when pressed even he's got the will to get into shape and come here and fight me-*

*-fight me because I chose Satsuki over him. No, not that. Because I wouldn't even keep in touch.*

Nonon tripped. Uzu and Seijitsu shifted uncomfortably; for the first time in the fight it looked like she didn't have the clear upper hand.

"I didn't abandon anyone!"

"Don't kid yourself. You had every chance to put in a good word for us!"

*I did. Even if he was a bad kid. He's my brother. And our parents too.*

She missed an opening, nearly got caught by some more whipping wires.

“So why? Because I was the heir? Because we fought as kids? Y’know I believe that,” He stomped towards her, swinging claws just inches away from her, “That is so. Like. You!”

“Shut up!” Nonon yelled, leaping clean over the *Medjay* mech and slapping it in the back with her coattail with such force that it fell face down. She rushed right back in to land a finishing blow, but Chimoku flicked the mech’s wrist and with that command a big chunk of steel rubble clobbered Nonon in the back and sent her sprawling too.

“Takamori was right,” Chimoku grunted as he got to his feet, “You are tough.”

“Had enough yet?”

“Not until you give me an answer. Why did you betray us? Why did you ruin my life?”

Nonon knew the answer somewhere in the back of her head. Saiban knew it all too well, he couldn’t see Nonon’s memories and not be convinced. She didn’t betray him because there was nothing to betray. They might have been related by DNA, but there was nothing except that. Satsuki, and Shiro, Uzu, Houka, and Ira, they were her real family. He might as well have been a stranger, just looking for someone to blame. Now more than ever, it was clear they didn’t know each other at all.

These thoughts raced through her head, but not coherently, and what she blurted instead was, “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“... Fine,” This time, Chimoku’s Ultima mech lit up brighter than ever, rotors on the wings glowing with strobing neon. With a great gust of wind the entire thing lifted off the ground and up into the sky.

*[Even he gets to fly, huh?]* Saiban muttered, and despite herself Nonon chuckled, *[Hold on, let me try...]*. Saiban briefly attempted to enlarge the vents on the back of his shoulder-plates and expel enough golden fire from them to lift them, but they only got a couple extra yards on top of Nonon’s jump. Not enough to reach him, and they landed on the ground now tens of stories below Chimoku.

“If you won’t tell me, then I’ll have to squeeze it out of you!” He shouted, sending his mech’s life-fiber tendrils down into the skyscraper. Uzu watched in awe as the entire building tore itself apart, its wiring and circuitry becoming lattice that transformed it into a great tornado of rubble that surrounded Nonon, crackling with electricity and making a deafening rumble like rolling thunder.

“Oh shit. **SAIBAN HYOSHI!**” Nonon shouted as Saiban transformed and blasted a tremendous wave of sound. Just in time, as Chimoku clenched his fist and the rubble collapsed together, and so the whole thing froze in a gigantic cloud of dust, kept suspended between Saiban’s wall of sound and the *Medjay*’s crushing power. For a moment everything froze that way, both Jakuzure’s red-faced from the strain.

Saiban’s headphones slid over Nonon’s ears, which was good for keeping out the noise around her, but the music that played was almost worse. Saiban didn’t really control it, it was

based on their mood, and right now what he was composing was less music and more a vicious dirge, like a hundred sirens in her head. It was intolerable.

“Fuck this.” Nonon leap again, jumping as high as she could and sprinting vertically across the rubble to try and make up the distance. But Chimoku closed his fist and before she could react it all closed in on her - a giant floating orb of lumpy concrete suspended in the air directly below him. All was still

*[We have to do something now!]* Seijitsu shouted, and Uzu immediately broke into a run. But there was a noise in the stillness, a dry, hollow scraping from within the concrete trap.

“She’s tunneling up. They’re fine.”

Nonon wasn’t exactly fine, but she was indeed unhurt. No matter how much pressure was exerted, the concrete was just ordinary concrete, and when Chimoku squeezed tighter rather than Saiban’s energy field giving way it was the rubble that got ground into dust. And so Nonon just punched her way up, every so slowly, creating a little tunnel and propping herself up with *Kiba* so she didn’t fall back down. Fortunately, Siaban produced plenty of light so it wasn’t impossible, just slow. Slow enough that she had time to think, although that didn’t help much.

*Satsuki’s my real family and she betrayed me. Betrayed everyone! And I don’t have anyone else, not this bastard, NEVER! It’s not supposed to be this way! I even told Uzu everything and he didn’t care! I’m supposed to be able to tell him anything and he didn’t even care so what the fuck! He’d take her side over me! They all would. Not a single one of them cares what’s right or wrong. Oh, but I’m no better. I kill people, I don’t take prisoners, I don’t even have the decency to keep in touch with my miserable blood relatives! What am I even doing here anymore? Anyone else could have lead this war, and I’m sure I don’t give a damn about getting praise from... who, Satsuki? Or getting a medal? Was it just so I could keep my authority?*

*[Nonon. Nonon something’s wrong. Your blood is boiling! You have to calm down!]*

She kept digging. Her fingers felt raw and her face numb, but the crushing pressure overwhelmed even this pain

*No, I know why I did it. I ran away so that I didn’t have to deal with Satsuki and Ryuko. I was a kid when I ran from my blood family, and they’re also much worse people than Satsuki, even considering... what she did. So what excuse do I have?*

*[I feel... Nonon I can’t keep stable like this! You have to calm down, please, or I... I...]*

“Just. A little. More!” Nonon grunted in time with her punches, and with the final one natural light finally spilled in, bursting the top of the concrete sphere clean off. She clambered to her feet, staggering as she did. Elongated, clawed, bloody fingers clutched her temples as she stared up at Chimoku. She could see him now behind the smooth glass of the cockpit. He looked horrified.

“Ugh... dizzy.”

*[Ugh... dizzy]*

Chimoku tried to crush her again, but seeing the rubble rise around her only got Nonon’s attention.

“You...”

[You...]

“Nonon? Nonon what are you doing?”

“RAAAGH!” Without thinking Nonon leap the rest of the distance with such force that all the tendrils connect the *Medjay* to the rubble snapped and the whole thing fell to the ground with a massive crash that blew everything in hundreds of yards away except Uzu. The electrical plant and the suburbs around it were reduced to a monotonous, dusty plain.

Uzu saw Nonon wrench off the *Medjay*’s wings with her bare hands, and then they fell together. He rushed up to catch her but she held on, slashing and kicking at the mech until they landed in a heap

“Nonon!” Uzu was relieved when she stood up, but through the dust all he could see was that she looked a little dazed. He was much less relieved to see Chimoku stagger to his feet too, looking much worse for the wear. His left arm and leg both seemed not to be working. And then full panic hit when Nonon turned towards her brother, lurching forward in a way you didn’t need Shingantsu to see was utterly inhuman. Worse, it was deeply familiar.

“No...” Uzu gasped, completely at a loss. It was the worst case scenario. She’d given in to the same berserk rage that had once consumed Ryuko and Senketsu.

[No, no this can’t be happening!] If Seijitsu could cry she would have been.

At this point Chimoku finally noticed his sister approaching. His eyes went wide. Maybe in that moment he realized that whatever he’d been trying to do was pointless – even long before the rage had taken her Nonon had become something totally different than the girl he’d bullied, something incomprehensible. Uzu neither knew nor cared.

“H-hey, hold on now,” He said weakly, “I mean, we had some good times, right? I-I mean, your fifth birthday, remember that?”

“ ... ”

“I-I wasn’t going to *kill* you, you know that, right? Right?”

Nonon was close enough now that he could see how her face had curled into a lipless snarl, her canine teeth elongated, her fingers erupted into claws. How Saiban wrapped around her like snakeskin.

“T-they didn’t tell me you could – you were – please-**URK!**” That loud grunt was the last noise he would make, as before Uzu’s eyes *Kiba*’s blade sunk clean through his chest, lifting him off the ground. He was dead, and Nonon’s chest kept heaving with fast, furious breaths.

Then she turned her head to Uzu and her eyes, oh thank God, they were still pink and round and not glowing. There was still something human in there. And the shock of seeing Uzu so distraught seemed to drag it back from the brink.

“...Uzu?”

[...Seijitsu?]

“Nonon... what have you done?”

Almost the moment she saw him, Nonon’s body began to change. Saiban unwound, and with him the claws receded with great bursts of blood that left the ends of her fingers splite wide open. Her face began to soften, and the extra growth on her teeth – rather than shrinking – simply broke off until her teeth were back to their normal size. That seemed particularly painful, and she howled in agony as Uzu rushed to catch her. *Kiba* and her brother’s body fell forgotten to the side.

“You’re alright, you’re alright. I’ve got you,” Uzu said as reassuringly as he could, but it felt quite hollow. He couldn’t believe how close that had been, and worse, that he’d done nothing to stop it.

“Ow...” Nonon murmured by way of response before passing out.

Uzu wasn’t one for thinking too deeply about anything except combat, but whatever had happened that day would keep him quite busy for the weeks of Nonon’s convalescence while he served as acting commander. How had Nonon become so unstable? It wasn’t her brother, Uzu was convinced of that. But how could it be Satsuki and Ryuko? Sure, it was a bit uncomfortable to think about but how could the next in a long line of Kiryuin incestuous relationships hit her so hard?

The only thing left was simple. It’s this place, this war. Being in command, living constant bloodshed, it was worse than Honnouji. That had to be it. And by the time she was healed he would begin to understand why.

## Chapter End Notes

I had an idea for an extra scene of Mataro looking after Nonon while she healed that got scrapped. Just consider that to be a thing that happened, and I'll revisit it later.

Also as a short aside, I do read Kill la Kill with a little bit of a socialist-type lens. If you want to complain about that I’ll remind you that the main villain is basically Rainbow Lesbian Jeff Bezos and there’s the whole fight club episode which is about Satsuki manipulating class struggle in order to enforce her authoritarian power. So there’s absolutely a bit of this in the text, you can’t claim I’m just pulling it from thin air.

# In which Ryuko meets Rei again, for the second time

## Chapter Summary

Holiday season delays! As always I have to split this up, hopefully gonna finish this one soon, but we'll see. I think I will actually consolidate this one once all the parts are done this time, but we'll see.

It's shameful, really. Why does everyone want me to do things other than write fanfic over the holidays?

February 2067

~~~~~

The original Kamui Corps training arena was an underground space some 100 yards in diameter and about that tall at the peak of its dome, but after a few months of continuous use it was starting to show its limitations. For such fast combatants the distance was small, it was hard to replace the floor when it inevitably got torn up, and tremors from the raging battles were a constant nuisance for the scientists above. The solution was obvious, and in short order a large parcel of the neighborhood directly behind the complex was bought up (for ten times the estimated property value since it was coming right from Ryuko's pocket and she didn't want anyone feeling shortchanged) and converted into a new arena.

One even wider than Honoujji. When it's high velocity life-fiber barrier spun to life the translucent red dome rose so high it was visible for miles around.

Ryuko was down there in the ring, having a practice duel with Ira, when Rei arrived on a damp, clammy afternoon. It was their day off, Houka and Shiro were on patrol, which usually meant this was Rei's time to train – not quite preferable to facing the enemy, but still essential. But when Ryuko was there she tended not to show up, and vice versa.

Not today though. Today she and Furashada had something to do.

~~~~~

"Aaaah! Oh, ah, hiya Rei!" Mako yelped, bouncing in her seat as she spotted Rei. Taken totally by surprise, she sputtered, "Ryuko's – I mean – she's – *they're* having a training right now!"

A gigantic slash from Ira's sword caught Ryuko right in the center mass and sent her flying, smashing into the barrier so that it wobbled like jello and bounced her back, trailing blood like a firecracker. But the moment she hit the ground the blood stopped, although she didn't and to human eyes it certainly seemed like she didn't hit the ground at all before speeding right at Ira again, a blur of pink flesh glowing with red light. Mako didn't flinch – even she was getting used to this now – and Rei certainly didn't flinch either.

"I know, it's alright," Rei nodded with a small smile.

“So... You wanna watch?” Mako asked, seeming excited to have caught Rei in a good mood. She patted the seat

“Only if I’m not a... uh, distraction...” When Rei first walked up Mako was writing in a notebook very seriously and Rei assumed she was doing some talent agent work for Ira. In fact, the thought ran through her and Furashada *how can she focus in the front row? The noise surely must be driving her nuts*. But when she actually got a look at it the notebook was just full of doodles of flowers and birds and ladybugs, and so Rei trailed off.

“Huh?”

“... Nevermind.”

They watched for a while, Mako pointing out the stunts she liked best. “Oooh, here comes a cool one!” She pointed as Tekketsu angled the vents in her rippling metal plates in every direction and blasted steam in gigantic cloud. Ira charged in and then he and Ryuko were both surrounded by the blinding vapor.

“I can still *feel* you you – hut!” Ryuko shouted, cutting herself off to block behind her without looking when Ira was suddenly there. After another flurry of blades Ryuko was pressing an advantage, nimbly dancing closer despite his longer reach until she was so close that his long arms and longer sword were suddenly a disadvantage, and it looked like she would land a blow with her pole and score the point. But when she leapt up right in from of him Ira shouted, “ **Tekketsu! Armor Piercing!**” and the center of the armor on his chest unfurled into a vent that shot a single burst of white-hot fire in a thick beam. Ryuko had just the merest instant to register surprise before she went spinning away, but the fire didn’t even singe her and blows like that which only knocked someone around but wouldn’t kill in a real fight didn’t count as points.

“Good,” She said with a vicious smile. She rushed back in and this time, instead of bother to meet his blade, leapt clean over it, scrambled onto his arm and then dropped to ground right in front of him, dodging as she slid to avoid too more fire blasts until she was directly under him, almost lying at his feet “But not good enough!” Ryuko kicked both her feet out into a split, knocking his ankles right out from under him. For the briefest moment it looked like he was about to fall on her, suspended horizontal in the air right a few feet above her, so she pushed off with the strength of her arms alone to headbutt him with such force that he was knocked back almost to standing. But before he could land she’d already lined up a beautiful grand slam to his head, sending him flying halfway across the arena.

“Woo-hoo! Go Ryuko!” Mako cheered. She cheered for them both equally. And on it went, Ryuko scored some, Ira scored some, but today Ryuko was scoring more often than not.

“Wow, she’s on a roll today, huh?”

“Mmm,” Rei nodded in acknowledgement, but she and Furashada were thinking, *I wonder if she noticed us?*

“Must be because she got good grades this semester,” Mako said cheerily.

“She did?”

“Mhm! Just got ‘em back this morning. She’s been doing better since Shiro and Houka started tutoring her.”



“Oh. Well that’s good.” Rei watched Ira show off another new trick, morphing his sword into a bladed whip (he’d been one of the first to figure out that just like a Kamui could change forms so could a life-fiber weapon) that wrapped around Ryuko and sliced her skin to ribbons, “And, uh, how is she doing aside from that?”

Mako looked at her, nervously trying to gauge what Rei’s intent was, before making a noncommittal “I dunno” noise.

Rei tilted an eyebrow skeptically. Did she really expect Rei to buy that?

“Aw okay fine,” Mako was obviously desperate to avoid both upsetting Rei and speaking for Ryuko, and after some consideration she said, “She’s good. Ryuko Matoi, the great philanthropist! Hehe, she likes it, it’s nice helping people. Although she does still get stagefright,” Mako finished with a giggle.

Rei nodded. That was good, she had to admit. Was she a little absolutely infuriated that she tried for almost a year to get her to use a little of her power, influence, and wealth for good and then within a couple months Satsuki got her appearing on TV once a week?

Well yeah.

But still, it was good and necessary and would lead to great things in the future. If it made Rei question whether there was any point to even being here today, she quickly swallowed it. She and Furashada had already committed, they weren’t backing down now. “And, uh, the whole… Ragyo thing?”

“Hm? Oh, right! She’s okay, er, she’s as okay you’d expect, right? She knows Ragyo isn’t controlling her because no way Ragyo could be *ever* besties and adopted sisters with a girl like me! So, yeah she’s much better than before. You remember when they first told her? She had a classic Ryuko freakout there.”

“Mhm, she – wait, what did you call it?”

“Oh, a Ryuko freakout! C’mon, you gotta know what I mean she does it preeetty often!”

Rei responded with a surprised laugh, “Well I suppose I do. I just didn’t expect you’d be so critical of her.”

“What! Critical! No no no you’ve got it all wrong. I think it’s cute, it’s how you know she really cares.”

“…I guess I didn’t think of it that way.”

“But you do know what I mean, don’t you?” Rei nodded, and Mako made a happy little humming noise and kicked her feet. Eventually she jumped back in and said, “I heard she fainted when you… had your fight. I heard Nonon found her.”

“…Yeah, I heard that too.”

Mako nodded, looking thoughtfully at her shoes, “She misses you, I think.”

Rei hoped she didn’t look as desperate as she was, but it was hard to miss how straight her back went when Mako said. “That’s what you’ve observed?” She said coolly.

“Well yeah. She’s awful busy these days, we all are. I mean I want to hang out with her and here I am, but I’ve got my own stuff to do! And Satsuki, oh man, I mean they’re always happy to see each other but all they do whenever they hang out is talk about work. *I don’t think Ryuko likes that much, do you?*”

*Oh you innocent soul, if only you knew,* Rei thought, and if she had any doubts that Mako was completely unaware of the affair between her adopted sisters they were banished then. “No, I don’t suppose she does.”

“Course not! But anyway, she doesn’t do much of the stuff she used to do with you anymore, and that’s not just because she doesn’t have time,” Mako leaned in a softly said, “Plus, whenever I ask about you, she gets real quiet. I know what that means with Ryuko.”

Rei’s heart soared with hope but also with apprehension. Being told there was a chance also meant there was a chance to mess things up too.

Not too long after that Ryuko and Ira’s duel wrapped up. Ira eventually managed to pull things back a bit, spotting the openings in Ryuko’s aggressive stance, but she still won by a good margin. They landed right in front of Mako and Rei with a great rush of wind as the life-fiber barrier turned off. Ryuko clearly hadn’t noticed that Rei was there before because of the shocked, nervous double take she took before anyone even spoke.

“Woo-hoo! Awesome job you guys!” Mako shouted as she tossed them both water bottles and towels. Tekketsu powered down in a burst of flashing light.

“Yes, another excellent round,” Ira nodded, and Ryuko smiled back with a big thumbs-up as she gulped down the water. Not that she needed it, but after a fight like that it tasted pretty damn good.

“I packed us lunches you guys! Eat up!” Mako shouted exuberantly as she produced a cooler from under her chair. Whatever was in there was sure to be delicious, but Mako looked at Rei dolefully, “Oh, shoot, I didn’t think to pack one for you. I’m so sorry!” She flung herself at Rei and hugged her – her way of begging for forgiveness. Rei patted her on the head and assured her it was quite fine.

Ira started unpacking his lunch immediately, but Ryuko didn’t seem that interested. “Yeah, just a sec,” she said gruffly, and without any real prompting Mako understood what she wanted and pulled Ira off to the side. Now it was just her, Rei, and Furashada. You could practically feel Tekketsu’s aura straining to hear what was going on, but she was just a bit too far away.

“So... how’s it going?” Ryuko finally asked.

“Not bad. Lot of good fights up in Hokkaido recently,” Rei answered simply.

Ryuko, clearly feeling awkward, raised a hand behind the back of her head. “That’s good, that’s good,” She said, “I, uh, heard about it on the news. How’s the new apartment?”

Sore subject. Rei had to get a new place to live since she couldn’t stay in Ryuko’s penthouse anymore. “It’s very nice. Bathroom’s bigger than the old one.”

“Wait, bigger?”

“Kamui Corps pays well, what can I say?”

“Sure, but I thought my place had...” *the best in everything* , Rei knew what Ryuko meant to say before trailing off. She said that sometimes, as though repeating someone else. Probably Satsuki had said it, of course she *gave* Ryuko the place.

*[Don't get discouraged now. You know mother isn't **really** impressed by that]* Furashada murmured. Rei nodded.

“Well, ah, I guess it was good to talk to you, huh? I mean you probably want to train with Ira and I-,”

“-Do you want to duel?”

“Wha- I...” Ryuko was more than surprised at first, but Rei could see the comprehension dawning on her face.

“I mean, if you don't that's fine, but I just thought -,”

“-No! No no, that's fine. Yeah, I'd like that,” Rei couldn't know what was going on in Ryuko's head, couldn't know how happy she was, how this was a moment she'd hoped for ever since Rei had left her penthouse. But Furashada could feel her joy in her aura and practically purred at it. And they both could see her smile, that smile that meant the world to them both. “I mean, I've been looking for something new,” Ryuko said awkwardly, and Rei smiled back.

Meanwhile, Mako gasped. “Oh. My. God. Ira look!”

“Huh,” Ira nodded thoughtfully as he watched Ryuko and Rei take the field, “You think this is a good sign for them?”

“Aching hearts and suppressed passions colliding on the battlefield! How exciting!” she replied dramatically.

“So... yes?”

*[Sometimes it's not so simple, you know].*

“Well, it's a good thing you packed a lot, Mako, because I think we have to stay and watch the whole duel, don't we?” Mako was thrilled that Ira came to that conclusion on his own. Like most men he was usually clueless, but every so often he figured things out!

Step one: complete.

## In which Ryuko meets Rei again, for the second time: 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February 2067

~~~~~

“So. I hear you’ve gotten a lot stronger since we... y’know.”

Rei called back from across the field, “I hear you’ve been absorbing more life-fibers every time you come down here for tutoring.”

“Is that unfair?” Ryuko said awkwardly, “I’d go earn them, but they won’t let me, y’know.”

“You think it’s enough to keep your lead?”

“I dunno, I sure hope so. I mean, I only had to use – what – a little more than ten percent of my full power last time we dueled back... uh... I mean...” *I just can’t keep my mouth shut, can I?* Ryuko was practically trembling with nervous energy. God, how she hoped Rei was here extending an olive branch, but how could that be true? She hadn’t even realized how much she wanted it until she felt Furashada’s aura back at her side where he belonged. She couldn’t imagine what else it could be, but the possibility was terrifying. And even if Rei did want to get back together, could she really do that? Would she dare do that to Satsuki?

*Now now, she said it was fine! She said, “On both sides our relationship must be invisible”. So it’s fine!*

*Right?*

Rei smiled to herself, knowing exactly how nervous Ryuko was, what she was hoping. It felt good to be wanted like that, even after everything she wanted Ryuko to want her. “Actually, I should tell you, I have a bit of a handicap in terms of power today,” She called.

“How so?”

“You heard of the reaction-booster pills Houka and Shiro made for Mataro before he left for Indonesia?”

“Uh... Oh! Yeah that’s right, something to help him stay alive if he ever got in danger, right?”

“ Exactly. He got the first test version, and here,” Rei held up her hand, knowing that with Ryuko’s sharp vision she could certainly spot the little white tab pinched between her fingers – probably smell it too. “Here we take the next step.”

“Smells like life-fibers. Lots of them. You sure you can put that in you?”

“Quite sure. Furashada will mop up the life-fibers after they do their job, which is momentarily supercharging the both of us .”

“I dunno... you’re sure there’s no side effects?”

Rei shrugged, “Mataro has taken several just fine, except for a pretty big crash when it wears off. But it’s my day off, I can go home and take a nap.”

“Hmm...”

“I mean, if you don’t think it’s *safe* I guess I can just toss it -”

“-No no, it’s fine!” Ryuko blurted. More than concern about looking cowardly or anything, the promise of a truly powerful opponent meant she couldn’t say no. “Geez, don’t let me tell you what to *do* or anything. Can’t blame a girl for being a little suspicious, right?” She said a little awkwardly.

“ No, I can’t. At least not for that.”

“What’s that supposed to...” Ryuko trailed off. Rei stood there innocently considering her axe, and Ryuko had to wonder if she’d misinterpreted her. “Just hurry up and transform, okay?”

“Gladly.”

When the brilliant light faded and Furashada’s irrepressible power flowed through them as smoothly as thought, Rei crunched the booster pill between her back teeth. At first, it felt like nothing had changed.

*Well that’s a bit dissappointing* , Rei and Furashada thought, but maybe that was a bit premature. Because Ryuko definitely noticed something.

Invisible to the human eye but plain as day to her, Furashada seemed to *swell* , like a gigantic billowing flame around their physical body. *Okay, I take it all back* , all Ryuko’s nerves and worries evaporated, *I need to fight th em, now !*

“Whoa,” She said, which got Rei’s and Furashada’s attention. And when she turned her head, saw Mako and Ira eating out in the bleachers, and there seemed to be something off about how they were moving, they realized what was happening.

They were moving in slow motion. Rei could see a croquette drifting through the air as slowly as a falling leaf, dropped from Ira’s chopsticks as he realized through Tekketsu just how much Furashada’s strength had suddenly spiked.

“Whoa.”

Ryuko grinned at her, the red undersides in her hair glowing like fire, and her movements weren’t slowed like everything else . No, she was pacing herself, every little twitch of her body at moderated to exactly match Rei . Rei lifted her axe, marveling at how it didn’t feel like anything was different with her. It was the world that changed, the world outside this little red bubble that she and Ryuko had all to themselves.

And even if she hadn’t known that the best way to get to Ryuko now was to focus on the battle, give her a real thrill, neither she nor Furashada could think of anything else. Nothing felt any different with them, but something was. This tremendous power needed to be vented.

Houka and Shiro and their Kamuis would get a lot of good data to analyze that day.

Step two: complete

~~~~~

Hitting the showers after their duel was something akin to torture for both Ryuko and Rei.

It wasn't the "being naked with just a thin tile wall between you and your ex who you're definitely not over" part. A Kamui was your skin, so wearing one basically meant being naked in public. They were used to it.

No, for Ryuko it was something surreal that struck panic in her. This felt so normal, so completely mundane after nearly a year of living like this, that it only served as a miserable reminder that those days were gone. And if she wasn't careful, what would happen? She should say something, but if she said the wrong thing there Rei would go storming out the door, and it would be months before she spoke to her again. Or maybe she'd stay and let Ryuko stew in her mortification.

And if that didn't happen. If that didn't happen that confirmed what Rei wanted, what she was here for – just the feeling from Furashada said he knew that's exactly what she wanted, and Ryuko was almost tempted to just go for it for his sake alone. But Satsuki, what would she say? In Ryuko's mind she knew her returning to Rei could only fill Satsuki with a brutal territoriality. But she kept going over that conversation they'd had on the Sunday of The Weekend they shared together, trying to convince herself that because Satsuki had given her tacit permission to keep up a relationship, as a cover. But would it be a cover? Would Satsuki be okay if it wasn't?

Could she convince Satsuki it wasn't even if it was?

And while she was understandably panicking, Rei was mostly exhausted. Her prediction about the booster pill giving her a massive crash was exactly right, and she was actually *sitting* in the shower because if she fell asleep on her feet cracking her head in the shower would be a pretty dumb way for a Kamui Corps member to go out. Furashada was also worn out – the fight had ended after almost exactly an hour simply because he basically short circuited. Now he could barely project an energy field strong enough to stop a few bullets, and Izanami had sent up a spool of life-fibers that he could absorb to restore his energy. But despite that he was still worn out which surprised Rei because she didn't know Kamui *could* get tired (though it was different than how a human got tired, sort of a flat delay on how fast he could think instead of a demand for sleep). So not only did her body feel like lead and her brain feel like it was immersed in soup, but the other half of her brain was also on time-out.

She was so close. Her plan had been going flawlessly but how was she supposed to execute on step three: seduce Ryuko if all she wanted was a nap?

"So that was pretty amazin' huh?" Ryuko asked over the patter of falling water. Rei nodded, but of course Ryuko couldn't see her. "Uh, hello? Rei? You awake over there?"

"Uh yeah! Yeah... I'm just... sorry. You were saying?"

"It was a good fight, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Definitely."

"You've picked up some good tricks. What was that one spinning move you kept using? The one it's so hard to predict which side it'll hit? Y'know, 'turbine...'"

“ ‘Turbine Guillotine’ . It’s corny, I don’t know,” Rei said apologetically. “I don’t come up with cool sounding attack names often. It’s just whatever words are rattling around in my head, I guess.”

“Aw, c’mon now,” Ryuko replied encouragingly, “It’s better than Ira where he just calls everything exactly what it is. He calls his beam attack ‘armor piercing mode’ which is like, we get it dude.”

Rei smiled, laughed through her nose, “That’s fair enough. It’s a bit of a misnomer too. I’ve never decapitated someone with it.”

“You got me a couple times.”

“Well sure, but here you are talking to me so...,” Rei said. They both had a good chuckle at that one. Even after everything it was easy to laugh with each other.

“ Ah, I hope they get more of those boosters made soon so I can go that hard with everyone else.”

“Eh. It’s just a stopgap. We will keep fighting and absorbing more life-fibers and then we won’t need them. But for now, it’s just enough so we’re equal to the enemy Kamui.”

“Huh. I guess that’s a good plan. And you do like fighting the enemy more than dueling, don’t you?”

Rei’s back went stiff. Ah yes, of course it would come to the interview . Well, what was she going to say?

*[What are we going to say?] Furashada repeated, lagging a little behind, [Well, I suppose it matters what she says, doesn’t it?]*

“Yeah? I might’ve said that.”

Ryuko sighed and cut right to the chase, “ I read your interview, okay?”

“Yeah... I knew you would.”

“I gotta be honest, I’m not happy you did that.”

“I know...” Rei groaned, “but I can talk to who I want about my life, can’t I?”

“But my ex, Rei, really? I mean, what am I supposed to think?”

“She doesn’t hate you at all.”

Ryuko scoffed, “Yeah, okay.”

“... You really haven’t talked to her since you broke up, have you?”

“Most people don’t, you realize.”

“...” Ryuko could hear Rei sigh a very heavy sigh. It suddenly occurred to her that Rei might think she was more upset about this interview than she really was. Or at least more upset than she thought she was. Really the most troubling part about it was that Satsuki had found it before her, before she could explain it. Ryuko suddenly decided what she was really upset about was that it had made Satsuki distrust her, which was more frightening than just about anything.

“Okay,” Ryuko finally said, “So she doesn’t hate me. And you’re right, you do have a right to talk about your life if you want. But ya didn’t have to go and mention me. Mention us.”

“But... you’re a part of my life,” Rei said in a very small voice.

*Oh dear*, Ryuko turned off her shower, stepped out. She was done anyway. A robotic arm reached out and handed her a fluffy, pale red towel with her embroidered monogram on it. The Kamui Corps showers were well appointed with tile mosaic, incense bowls, and little fountains in the middle of the main hall. A peaceful place, and Rei’s sure looked like she wanted to be at peace through the wavy, opaque glass door, although Ryuko could only see a blurry outline of her sitting on the ground, kneading her cheeks to keep herself awake.

“Geez. You sure you’re good?”

“Izanami says my vitals are normal... I just need sleep to rest.”

“No kidding,” Ryuko rubbed her hair with the towel with no regard for neatness, tangling it all up as she did. “So why’d you do it anyway? Did you want me to read it?” She asked in a calm, conversational tone.

“No! I mean, uh, I knew you would. But that wasn’t the point. I just wanted to tell people about myself. Now at least I know they won’t get the wrong idea about how I used to work for Ragyo.”

“But why her? It freaked me out, you know that? I mean I don’t know what she believes now, but she used to-”

“Haruka is... I do know what she used to believe, but that’s not true anymore. She just thinks we’re really important, historic figures, and she wants to be there to document our lives. I don’t think that’s that crazy. A-and she spent her whole life’s savings on cameras a reporting gear and stuff.”

“Hey. I didn’t have direct access to the Kiryuin fortune back then. Otherwise I’d’ve given her way more gifts and stuff, I’m not made of stone.”

“I wasn’t trying to imply that,” Rei said, and from the plainly dismissive way she said it Ryuko knew that she wasn’t. “I just was thinking though, that I could give her an opportunity. Y’know, kinda-sorta like what you did for me.”

“Oh c’mom, what did I do for you?”

Rei yawned, “Don’t kid around. If it weren’t for you... I wouldn’t be friends with any of the rest of your family. I wouldn’t have Furashada. I’ve said that before I *know* I have.”

That’s right. She had. It was like Ryuko was remembering it for the first time, a whole history she had tried to cut herself off from. It was odd, all those arguments felt so small and inconsequential now. Now that it was over and that time was all memory.

“Did you mean everything you said in that article? I mean, how you didn’t like going out to parties with me?”

“She oversimplified things... but...” Rei didn’t have the heart to come down too harshly in person. They did have some good nights, after all. But nothing quite so perfect as sitting in Ryuko’s hot tub, just the two of them.



“But?”

“It was just a lot, okay? I can’t keep that up every night.”

“But that stuff about it reminding you of your time with Ragyo, what about that?”

“Well...”

“No, it’s okay. I’m trying to be more aware of stuff like that. I’m sorry.”

Rei nodded slowly, “It’s okay.”

“ Actually, I gotta apologize to you for more than that Rei.”

She didn’t get a response, so Ryuko looked up from her towel, “Hey, Rei. You’re still awake, right?”

“Oh yeah, yeah. ‘M listenin’.”

“Good, ‘cuz I’m serious. I... look I won’t repeat it here but you know damn well what I did,” That was probably still saying too much. The walls truly had ears here, even if she trusted those ears she didn’t want them to let the secret out. “I knew I was wrong to go behind your back, to lie to you – I really thought you wouldn’t find out how fucked up is that? And looking back on it it’s like I was waving it in your face.”

“ So why-”

“I don’t know! Okay? The thing is... I’m not sorry for *the thing* itself. I can’t be. It’s part of my life, like you, I don’t know how else to say it,” Rei didn’t answer, and through the glass Ryuko was worried that she was glowering, unforgiving. But truth be told she was listening with full attention. She badly wanted to understand it. She couldn’t accept that it was just a Kiryuin curse, what did Satsuki have that she didn’t? Hearing no response, Ryuko went on, “ I can’t explain it. Maybe it’s having Ragyo in me, maybe it’s not having Senketsu to look after me and rein in my impulses, maybe it’s just what I was going to do all along. I don’t – you don’t have to understand it. You don’t have to forgive me. I’m just sorry I ever got you mixed up in my bullshit. That’s what I’m sorry for. I never meant to hurt you.”

*And Rei thought, I see. If you do know, you’re not telling me. Although maybe that’s just because you can’t or else Izanami will figure out what you’re talking about, but somehow I doubt that. You don’t know either. You stupid, beautiful fool (she’d been watching Ryuko dry her legs, which was enough to almost derail her train of thought) you don’t know why you do almost anything, do you? But no matter. I’ll figure it out sooner or later. And besides, I have things Satsuki doesn’t too. Either way, Rei had to admit she was getting even more tired. She took a very long, deep yawn before she finally spoke.*

“I want to try forgiving you, Ryuko.”

Ryuko gasped, “Really? Y-you serious?”

“I’ll try,” Rei yawned again. Furashada wasn’t even really following along anymore, and that threw her even deeper into exhaustion. Coupled with the soothing shower she felt like she was sinking. Really too bad because this was the time to send it home. But maybe she could work that to her

advantage. “I want to try. Maybe... maybe just as friends, I don’t know. But you’re very special to me Ryuko... even still.”

“Thank you Rei. Please, friends is fine, I just want you to know I didn’t mean to... hey, don’t fall asleep now!” Rei was slumping over, and although it was partially feigned she was honestly done. She’d got what she wanted, now it was time for a good long nap. She probably wouldn’t even go home, just get into a spare bed here. Maybe, if she had a little more energy, she could try to coax Ryuko to join her. Oh well, next time.

*~Oh dear~ Izanami’s voice suddenly cut in over the speakers ~I’ll make up a bed for her, get a more comfy stand for Furashada. Would it be too much to ask for you to go in there and lift her out. Something like that requires a more human touch than I’ve got.~*

“Well, I suppose...” Ryuko flung open the door, thinking that this was maybe a little more than she bargained for. So long as she didn’t think anything too inappropriate...

*[I’ll be sure to tell Shiro that the drug isn’t ready for full production. It works just fine on the kid because he doesn’t have a Kamui, but this is just too much. So kind of adverse resonance...]*  
Izanami babbled, seemingly feeling pretty awkward at being involved. Ryuko could get that, the Kamui were more independent than human children would be from their mother but she’d still made them and that meant something. But she wasn’t really thinking about that.

That sweet, dreamy look in those half shut eyes, the little twitch of a smile on those diffident, dainty little lips, the feeling of her skin and the way she lazily tucked her arms in across her belly. Ryuko couldn’t help but be captivated, and immediately the urge to kiss her was almost unbearable.

*Just on the forehead. That could mean anything. That doesn’t mean anything!* Ryuko told herself, although she knew it wasn’t true.

She did it anyway.

Step three: complete (although perhaps not how Rei had intended)

~~~~~

Rei woke up to a flurry of texts from Ryuko. She hadn’t said everything that needed saying, no, not by a long shot. But it was impossible at the research complex where omniscient AIs were keeping constant tabs on everything, and it seemed risky via text – it could be hacked.

Was she asking if she could come over? Rei asked. Would that be what it took to say everything?

It was as if Ryuko hadn’t even considered the possibility, but truth be told it was all she’d thought about since that afternno. It wasn’t one of the days when Ryuko went to Satsuki’s, fortunately. This was something Rei found out by asking her college friends who shared the penthouse with her, and she was informed that two or three nights each week Ryuko went out without explaining where she was, but the others she just went into the city to find accidents and emergencies and intervene, the way she’d always done. When she slept was a mystery to them – the answer, not very often.

Ryuko was so happy at the suggestion – but she did agree that it would have to be as friends. Yes, that was the only way it would work. But It was as if she’d never said that when she showed up, hair all disheveled from her motorcycle but otherwise quite dolled up - she’d even brought out all the makeup she didn’t have the guts to throw away back when she found out about Ragyo. Rei too

didn't waste any time entertaining that delusion, and she was busy putting on the finishing touches of her makeup and hairstyle when the elevator reached her floor.

*What am I doing?* Ryuko thought, almost desperately, as she collected herself in the elevator, *This had better work out alright, or else I'll be back at square one.* She kept weighing her options, but there wasn't really anything more appealing than just enjoying this ride and seeing how it worked out. Maybe it would turn out okay. *That's the exact mentality that got you into this mess in the first place.* She knew that, but it was so hard to think about that when every proactive option involved leaving one or another of the women she loved in tears, instead of what she knew deep down was coming the moment she reached Rei's floor.

She wasn't disappointed. Unlike Satsuki, Rei wasn't interested in being wooed, wasn't half afraid of any kind of sexual contact so she needed all night and a little alcohol to work up the courage. She was waiting when Ryuko walked in the front door, now well rested and bouncing on her heels.

"Hey."

"Uh, hey. Wow, you weren't kidding, this place is pretty fancy," Ryuko nodded awkwardly as she looked around. Big glass windows, cushy white modernist couches, glossy black basalt countertops. There didn't seem to be too many rooms, though they were big. Not enough space for nearly forty college students to share it and still keep it fairly neat, more like just enough space for one cultured young woman to live very comfortably. Or two.

"Isn't it? I felt bad at first, splurging on something so elaborate. But with the amount we get paid I figured it was better to put the money back into the economy."

"Uh, sure," Ryuko shrugged. She couldn't help but notice how happy Rei looked to see her – how good she looked too. Even Furashada seemed brighter, more vibrant. His aura was definitely full of life. Now that, that was maybe even more pleasant than looking at Rei, although for very different reasons.

"C'mon, let me show you around!" Rei said, although in truth there wasn't much to see. The tour started in the very same main living area Ryuko entered in and ended right down the hall. In the master bedroom.

"So? What do you think?"

"Pretty classy joint you've got here, you've got real good decorating sense. But you already knew that, you rearranged my room way back when," Ryuko said very casually.

"Not hard to rearrange when it's just piles of clothes on the ground."

"Well, you might be right..." Ryuko didn't have anything more to say. Rei was standing very close to her. She could tell that Furashada was serving as a sort of aura-intermediary for some very strong feelings. She slipped a hand around Rei's waist – she didn't swat it or try to get away. And when Ryuko looked down at her with a smug smile Rei was wearing just about the same one.

And that was it. "You're the worst, you know that?" Ryuko said with a chuckle, scooping Ryuko up so their lips met and Rei wrapped her legs around Ryuko. She was about to drop her onto the bed when -

“Hold on! Gotta make sure Furashada’s nice a comfy.” Rei unwrapped herself and scurried over to the specially made post on which she always hung him. He purred with comfort as she hooked him up. With their deep connection their thoughts were practically one and the same, but this was a comfort that was all his own. Finally, his little family was back together.

For a Kamui, the very concept of sex is only experienced through the lens of their human. It was like eating, sleeping, breathing, taking a shit – a body process that needed to be done to keep the human healthy and happy. Trying to understand it on its own was like trying to explain a Kamui’s needs to a human – the need to intermingle and resonate auras with other Kamui, the need to absorb life-fibers, the need to vent power through battle – a human could never understand these things except by experiencing them through their Kamui. So for Furashada that it was his creator, his mother who fulfilled that need for Rei was all the better. He loved her, but not nearly the same way, so together they knew they loved her twice as much.

As for Rei, she was much more concerned with making this the best night of Ryuko’s life than having such a good one herself. Oh sure, it was *good*, but that wasn’t the point.

Years of training and experience were poured into her every languid move. Fuck whatever her psychiatrist said, or how messed up it was, what good was everything she’d learned in Ragyo’s service if she couldn’t put it to work. And she could put it to work. Ryuko’s legs were numb by the time they were winding down, and that was hours later.

It was Ryuko’s final round for the night – even with boundless energy she felt a bit wiped – and Rei was determined to make it the best she’d ever had. Such subtle, gentle movements of fingers and tongue, leveraging every trick, including all the ones she’d learned about Ryuko (oddly she tended to like it more gentle than Ragyo had, doubly so because when she was on top she went *rough*). But then, right before her climax, Rei suddenly lifted her head from between Ryuko’s legs.

“Has Satsuki ever fucked you like this? Huh?” Rei almost shouted

“Ah! God Jesus Rei don’t *stop!*”

“Say it. Say I’m better than her!” She wanted Ryuko to know it. She needed Ryuko to get that simple fact through her thick skull.

“Fine! Fuck! You’re better!”

Rei smiled smugly, “That’s what I thought,” She mumbled as she got back to work.

And it was better – much better – than any conventional sex Satsuki had ever tried. Hell, probably better than anything Rei had given her before. Maybe even on par with the purification ritual – well, that was such an unusual experience it barely even counted. In the moment Ryuko decided that technically it didn’t

“Fuck, I really am fucked, aren’t I?” Ryuko panted as they basked in the afterglow together. Rei was right, that was better. Not only had it been better sex (at least by one standard), their battle today had been better than her recent duels with Satsuki too. Well, at least by standards of how much of her full power Ryuko got to use, not like it compared in technical competence which was a category where Satsuki was obviously unmatched. And that summed it up, really. They were both offering something different, and Ryuko didn’t think she could live without either.

But Satsuki couldn't live without her all to herself. Where was she now? Probably in her office, working. Innocent as a lamb to the slaughter. *Now now, she said it was fine!*

*Do you really believe that?* The clearer, smarter, meaner part of her mind said. And she had to admit, she didn't.

She tried to work through it all again. *In the end they'll never rest until they have me to themselves. That sounds insane, but it's true! I should feel lucky to have them but instead I'm right back where I started.*

*So, I'll have to choose. And it has to be Satsuki. She needs me in her life or else she'll work herself to death*, and that was something Ryuko did truly believe. *And besides, I love her. Rei will get over me eventually. Look at Haruka – she's **kind of** over me.*

*But I can't date Satsuki. I can't marry Satsuki. We'd have to go on in secret for the rest of her life. No house, no white-picket fence, no kids – if that's what she wants. What kind of way to live is that? I've got such a sort window of time when either of them are alive and then I'll be all alone forever. I need to use it to the fullest, and I can only do that with Rei. I can fix it so that this was just a bump in the road. Every couple has things like that! And besides, I love her. It's so, so cruel, but with Satsuki it just isn't meant to be.*

It was so cruel. So cruel that she would be made to choose. Not for the first time, she knew she was missing the answer because she was missing part of herself. Senketsu would have known what to do. Instead, the days were numbered now. One way or another she'd have to ruin something precious.

This was the Sword of Damocles Satsuki was so familiar with. Somehow things were working out - for now – but sooner or later that sword would drop. Whatever her talents, handling this wasn't one of them.

She cried, and when Rei looked up, concerned, she couldn't bear to look at her and buried her face in the pillows. And when she woke up Rei was already gone, headed out for another day of battle with Furashada. On the nightstand there was a simple note that read "I can't stop thinking about you."

Ryuko had no idea what to do with herself for the rest of the day, or maybe ever. Not even Mako could help her with this.

Step Four: Complete.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm back in it, should be coming out more regularly for a while now since holiday travel is over. We're approaching the final part of the Ryuko/Satsuki/Rei love triangle now and I would say roughly halfway through part 2. No better time to drop any feedback or suggestions, especially on this chapter. It turned out to be a surprisingly tough chapter to write.

# The Down-Under Deception: A New Mission

## Chapter Summary

Like 90% talking. Sometimes that's how they go.

February 2067

~~~~~

Ryuko cried after that first night at Rei's, and after the second as well. At least that second time it was a pretty subdued affair – roll out of bed and scurry to the bathroom, take a moment to realize what she'd done, then wipe her face, clean up her eyeliner, and come back out to find Rei already asleep. Or at least pretending to be asleep, Ryuko was pretty sure given how purposefully even and sharp her breathing was. Rei didn't want to talk about what they were doing, what came next, and Ryuko couldn't tell if it was her devious plan to keep her hooked or just because Rei was afraid that talking would lead to bursting this little bubble they were in. Ryuko had been in a position like this before, and it was just as hard to break out of it as before.

But the difference this time was that of Satsuki's current blissful ignorance, or of what she'd feel when she inevitably found out, was truly dreadful. So of course the next night when Ryuko went to Satsuki's cottage, she found herself confessing without any prior planning at all.

"Hey. I've got something to tell you. And I know it's gonna upset you but it's better to hear it from me than from the grapevine," They had been about to settle down, Satsuki sitting in the big armchair, Ryuko on a pillow on the floor between her legs so when she tilted her head back it was directly in Satsuki's lap. Satsuki put her tea down, face inscrutable – which told Ryuko she'd probably already guessed what it was and was already upset. But Ryuko soldiered on, "I saw Rei a couple days ago."

"...Oh."

"And, uh, we had sex."

"..." Ryuko could feel a minuscule shot of tension resound through Satsuki's body. A momentary clench of her face as though she'd eaten something sour.

"Twice."

"I see," Satsuki nodded coldly. Ryuko turned herself around so she could look at Satsuki's face right-side-up. She decided that behind that careful composure there could only be despair. "So you have decided to resume your relationship?"

"Well now – hold on, don't jump to conclusions – I don't know, we haven't really talked about that much. Or at all."

"But you've slept with her twice," Satsuki observed.

“It’s the truth! It’s touchy.”

Satsuki still seemed acceptable, “Is this sort of state of affairs common? Are you sure you haven’t miscommunicated somewhere?”

Ryuko didn’t understand that Satsuki was truly confused how two sane people could have sex twice in as many nights and not know if they were dating or not. She just thought Satsuki was digging the knife in, because she deserved to have the knife dug in. So she got defensive, saying, “Sats, don’t look at me like that, c’mon. You said that it was okay if we got back together, remember?”

“Yes. I did say that,” Ryuko tensed, turned her eyes away, waiting for the “*but...*”. It didn’t come, but Ryuko felt it when Satsuki took her by the chin and gently directed her face back up, “I’m glad you told me.”

“No you’re not,” Ryuko took her hand, “I know you’re not, because I lied to you when I said she was in the past.”

“Lied? Or believed that at the time?”

“Does it matter?” Ryuko was barely able to process that Satsuki gave her a chance to get off the hook. “Look, I just... I’m sorry, okay?”

“And I don’t blame you. Did I not predict this might happen? Although, are you sure you don’t know whether you’re formally back together?”

“No idea! It’s just been spur of the moment.”

“Well what does Rei think? Does she want you all to herself? Is it spur of the moment for her too?”

“She won’t say! We barely even talk, we just... uh...”

“Hmm.”

“I think it was just an impulse decision, but she’s not talking and Furashada isn’t either.”

Satsuki furrowed her brows, looking puzzled and concerned, “Well, I just don’t see how that could be.”

Ryuko shrugged, “I told you everything, I dunno either. I’m still tryin’ to figure it out.”

“Well. Thank you for being honest. Now, did you want to watch a movie? I have something to read if you need to do homework. Or we can just talk about something else.”

Their evening went on as usual, but there was an undeniable tension. As much as Satsuki had foreseen this, it was still deeply disappointing. Why did Ryuko go back to her? Was there something she wasn’t getting? It was the sex, wasn’t it? Satsuki could only imagine it was, and knew full well she couldn’t compare to that experience, though she did try.

“How’s this? Is that good?” She asked, her wrist twitching in awkward motions as she kept her eyes locked with Ryuko, trying to gauge her success by the shuddering of her breath, the moments when the brightness of her eyes briefly hazed over.

“You can go deeper. Mmm, but keep your index finger riiight where it is,” Satsuki obliged. What an unusual sensation. But she was getting better at looking past that initial... repulsion wasn’t the right word, more like scientific detachment. How could Ryuko, *her* Ryuko, also be this soft little thing of flesh and blood? It was marvelous but also deeply surreal.

When she did particularly good Ryuko arched her back, squeezing her eyes shut, and without warning reached up to massage Satsuki’s breasts. “That... feels so strange,” Satsuki gasped.

“But good, huh?”

“Mhmm. Ah!”

“You know, not all girls like that, I’ve found.”

“So how’d you know I would?”

Ryuko grinned and chuckled as though it was just a normal conversation and Satsuki wasn’t two fingers deep in her, “It works for me.”

Satsuki laughed at the simplicity of that, “Quite.” *That’s a good idea, I’ve never tried that before*, Satsuki thought, but her other hand was behind Ryuko’s neck, bracing her, and that felt right. She’d have to use her mouth, wouldn’t she?

It worked pretty damn well.

The next morning they both woke up early because the rising sun shot through the thin shades like they weren’t even there (one of Satsuki’s many tricks to help her keep her busy schedule). So early that Satsuki had time for a little reading, and Ryuko was snuggled at her side still half asleep. This was all how it should be, but Ryuko didn’t feel fully at ease. She didn’t deserve Satsuki’s forgiveness, yet she wanted to move past what she’d done with Rei to the part where it all worked out in the end.

So she was still waiting for Satsuki to strike back with something, and she got it, “I’m glad you were honest with me last night, because I have something I need to be honest with you about.”

“Hmm?”

“You remember that diplomatic marriage with the Australian heiress I mentioned? We’re going through with it.”

Ryuko sat up, “Shit. Alright.”

“I should have kept you more in the loop, I’m sorry. But I need to tell you now because there’s going to be a large ball and conference to iron out the details, and considering who you are it would be fitting that you attend it.”

“No.”

“I see. Are you upset with me, Ryuko? I can only imagine you would be.”

She was. Dating Rei, well that was just dating, a commitment that could be dropped and already had been once. It left the option open that maybe one day things could be different. A *marriage*, a geopolitically important one no less, was much more final. But yet Ryuko knew for a certainty that



whoever this woman was she would mean *nothing* to Satsuki, and the same couldn't be said of Rei. She didn't have a leg to stand on.

*I wonder if Satsuki feels the same, but in reverse*, Ryuko thought, but what she said was, "Hey man, that was our deal, right? You can do whatever we want, only makes our cover stronger. But I'm not going this party of yours."

"Hmm. That isn't what I expected, truthfully."

"You thought I'd just smile and nod while you - ,"

"- No. But I have some reasons why you might reconsider. Reasons that I can't discuss here. This cottage is very secure, but not as much as my office in the Parliament Building."

"Oh, it's *these* kind of reasons."

"You're already beginning to get a sense of it. Can you come to my office today? I'm sure you won't mind skipping classes."

~~~~~

"There are REVOCS agents in the Australian government," Satsuki said bluntly almost the moment Ryuko entered her office and sat down.

"At this point I'm hardly surprised. They seem to be everywhere. They have plenty even here in Japan."

"Indeed, but our spies suggest that they are very high ranking in the Australian nobility . Now, we have negotiated military access to Korea and what's left of the Chinese government and obviously Indonesia and several other countries that have been invaded, but not Australia," Satsuki's desk had a detailed pacific-centered map of the world beneath its glass surface which she used to gesture vaguely at the places she mentioned. "However, if this marriage goes through, by their laws Japan would be the overlord over their country – since I'm essentially standing in the role traditionally for a man. So my original plan was to use that to force them to reform their government to be more like ours. But now I just want to get our Kamui within their borders the moment Nonon finishes the current theatre of war so we can keep on the offensive. Got all that?"

"Sure. So they've been making it tough for the marriage to go through? Figures only guys working for the baddies would be against the guys killing them when the whole country is under attack."

"But they do it under the cover of protecting their own sovereignty - their independence from foreigners. If they'd like to rule over an ash heap, that's all well and good except that there are innocent people dying and dozens of those obelisks all around. But Australians have always been like that – it's even lead to atrocities in the past when they refused to let in refugees. So it's hard to call their bluff, most people in their country won't do it."

Ryuko nodded. This was pretty cut and dry compared to a lot of the history Shiro was trying to teach her, "But you got enough people to agree, right? So didn't we kind of win?"

"Kind of. You see, the ball is going to be held on an unnamed island right here," She pointed into the middle of the southeastern Pacific. "It's been used as a neutral point for world leaders and a tax haven for years – supposed to be quite luxurious."

“But we won’t be there for tourism.”

“Not at all. Our spies tell us that these REVOCS agents have been discussing with their higher-ups the possibility of assassinating me while we’re there. If you attend as well, the possibility of capturing you, killing me, proving to the world that nowhere is beyond their reach, and bumping off some of their own rivals in the chaos – it will be irresistible.”

“Ahh, I see what you’ve got here,” Ryuko grinned in spite of herself. This was more interesting than she’d been expecting by a *broad* margin, “They think we’ll be walking into a trap, but really it’s us who’ll be doing the trapping.”

“Now, it’s too dangerous for you to fight anything strong enough that it might actually beat you, but if they sent one of their Kamui you’d be able to detect its presence.”

“Once I got on the island I’d get the feeling it was there, yeah. I don’t have as long a range as Nonon on that but it’s pretty good for powerful things.”

“If that happens we’ll just leave right away, but I don’t think it will. They will try to use covert methods, no doubt underestimating just how formidable you are. And besides that we have our trump card – two Kamui wired into supercomputers and our own Houka Inamuta. If all else fails we can just hack every system on the island and let Houka sort it out from there. Plus Nonon is sending one of her best agents as well, he seems to have a good deal of experience with REVOCS agents.”

“Seems like you’ve thought of everything, as usual.”

“Everything except that you might not want to go. How do you feel about it now?” Satsuki leaned in over her desk. As if she even had to ask. The glint in their eyes was the same.

“So this is really what the whole marriage thing was all about, huh?” Ryuko shook her head, “Geez, and I really thought you were trying to make me jealous or somethin’.

Satsuki’s face froze, “Don’t be absurd. I’ve been planning this for months.”

“Well, I dunno. Telling me about it right after I told you about Rei? I mean don’t worry about it, that’s clearly not what it is. It just *felt* like that.”

“You shouldn’t make light of this, Ryuko. I’ve made my peace with our situation more than you, it seems. When did I ever give you that impression?”

“You didn’t! That’s just the sort of thing people normally do.”

“Well I wouldn’t stoop to it.”

“... But you’ve gotta see how it feels like a trade, right? Rei for this Aussie princess?” Ryuko said, holding up her hands like a scale illustratively

“If that were the case it would be a poor trade for me.”

“And that doesn’t piss you off? Even a little?”

Satsuki sat back into her chair and sighed, “Of course it does. But I made my choice – some of you is better than none. You think I want to do this? Diplomatic marriages are something you only get

one of, putting aside that if I get my way they may soon be a thing of the past for good, and the fact that I'm having to spend mine on just *Australia* is... but nevermind that."

"Yeah, I don't like talking about that."

"But you need to understand that no matter how this trip goes it's not going to change our relationship. This is how it is, unless Nonon or Rei does something catastrophic and outs us. So don't get hung up on that. Go ahead, patch things up with Rei. Hell, propose to her someday if you think she'll say yes. I'll still be here, and it might not be ideal but this is what we have."

Ryuko stared at her lap, "Yeah, I got you. We've been over it before, over and over. I just... I want to make you happy, but I keep fucking it up. Don't you want to believe that's possible? I felt like, on The Weekend, like it might have been."

"We find happiness where we can in this world. And truthfully, with what's on the line, I'd find far more happiness standing side by side with you in victory than at an altar. You can check back when we've won," The steely glint was back in Satsuki's eyes. It was a good vision, those stupid agents thinking they were so clever only to be totally outfoxed and overpowered. That would make them both happy. "This is just one step closer. So I'll ask again, Ryuko dear, will you join me on this mission?"

"After all that? I don't know who I'd be if I didn't."

# The Down-Under Deception: Ryuko Goofs

## Chapter Summary

There are a couple important events which I had conceived of since long before I thought of writing this fic. And this chapter and the next three or so after it are without a doubt one of them. God, I hope it's half as good as I had envisioned it.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March 2067

~~~~~

“Ah, the great Lady Mato! I am so – *truly* – honored to finally meet you,” The Executive Minister of Australia, a burly but aging man with a wobbly chin and doughy cheeks reddened by webs of little capillaries, said in thickly accented Japanese. He lifted Ryuko’s hand to his lips and dutifully pecked the golden embroidery on her smooth black leather glove. “You look just as... magnificent in person as your reputation holds!” He went on, pausing momentarily as he seemed to struggle to come up with a word.

*Unbelievable. I can't tell if you were gonna say “lovely” or “terrifying”, but how hard is it to plan what you're going to say before you come over to me?*

“It’s a pleasure to meet you!” She responded in very poor but upbeat English. Satsuki had told her that memorizing some basic English phrases was absolutely essential, but she’d also – very excitably – said that everything else she wanted Ryuko to do was absolutely essential. Compared to memorizing the names and faces (and now that she’d met them in person, smells) of all the suspected REVOCS agents at the party, meeting the team of elite agents that would be backing her up, and getting her outfit up to Satsuki’s exacting standards that seemed like the least important thing. And honestly she didn’t feel much like being polite, not today.

“Ah, and of course I must introduce you to my dear daughter! Liza? Won’t you come here, please?” And here she came. Of course Ryuko had spotted her already, even if she weren’t constantly surrounded by a flock of courtiers like her father she was the only person who nearly matched Ryuko and Satsuki in the extravagance of her outfit. And, distressingly, in looks too.

“Here she comes. Liza, I’m sure you know who this already. Lady Mato, I present to you Liza Stanhardt The Second. Or, I suppose soon to be Liza Kiryuin,” The old man laughed and rubbed a meaty hand on his daughter’s golden blonde hair affectionately. Liza’s big green-grey eyes were basically popping from her head as she curtsied, no easy task with all those layers of silky skirts.

“It is honor, er, honorable to meet you, Lady Mato!” The little heiress blurted, then realized the mistake in her Japanese and quickly added, “I’m sorry! I don’t speak Japanese very well” (this being the only phrase she’d learned very well).

Ryuko bit down her innate up-welling of jealousy. She'd done some cursory social media stalking, she'd known the girl was beautiful, possessed of the daintiest pointed chin and lips that curled up naturally into an innocent, thoughtful look. She also knew that, by all indications, she was genuinely bi – based both on the models she followed and pictures of her with both prior boyfriends and girlfriends.

But she smiled smugly and nodded approvingly as she said in English, "That's okay. I'm not very good at English. It's a pleasure to meet you, Liza," Ryuko responded, trying as best she could to sound sophisticated in front of this clearly overawed girl. When Liza heard this she smiled broadly, giggling nervously, and even though Ryuko's super-charged nose could *smell* the intimidation coming off her Liza also seemed desperate to be her best friend.

And so Ryuko couldn't be too upset at her. Out of all the people Ryuko had met today she was one of the few who still had some degree of vital energy to them, that age and a life of power politics hadn't wrung from them. She clearly didn't get out much, and today she was having the time of her life. Certainly meeting Ryuko was almost as much of a highlight as meeting her future wife, maybe even more so. How would she feel when some day down the line she learned of Satsuki's premeditated infidelity?

*She doesn't seem like the type who'd dare confront Satsuki. Hell, she'd probably think I deserve it. Which, I can't believe I'm saying this, is pretty damn unfair to her. But with a body like that, maybe Satsuki'll give her enough attention she doesn't feel left out... actually I changed my mind, I don't need to be fair to her. She's the boring, empty headed trophy wife, I'm the cool, secretive mistress. I win. Let's not over-complicate things.* Ryuko told herself, but she still felt unspeakable relief when they finally left.

And once they had, nobody else really seemed inclined to talk to her. No surprise, people had been getting out of her way since she got there, giving an obligatory greeting then playing a giant, slow moving game of music chairs around the ballroom to let her go wherever she wanted without a single interruption. They'd all encountered the august Kiryuin presence before, from either Satsuki or their mother, and they didn't have to think about it much. Not a single one of them could forget that she was (insofar as they knew) the person who'd *killed* Ragyo. Logic dictated she had to be even bigger and ten times meaner.

Satsuki had recognized this, of course, and wanted to encourage it. That was exactly why she'd rejected the first ten or so designs for Ryuko's outfit. She'd started with the skirtsuit she'd worn at the Kamui ceremony, assuming that was elaborate enough, but no.

And so came the final design – a velvety black frock coat with high collars and long coattails over something between an armored breastplate and a corset. Between that thing wrapping around her chest and her gigantic lapels it pushed up and highlighted Ryuko's breasts in a way that might not have been embarrassing to her anymore but sure felt a bit *excessive*. Plus, to Ryuko's eyes it screamed "*stab here*". Add to that trousers and half-calf high-heeled boots with ornate gold shinguards, huge metal epaulettes, big puffy sleeves that slipped nicely back into gauntlets molded perfectly to her wrists. Then, to top it all off, the gold and red buttons and embroidery – Satsuki had suggested something floral, or leaves, or smooth patterns evoking waves, but Ryuko went with sharp lines and jagged geometry. If it reminded onlookers an awful lot of life-fibers, so be it.

In the end Ryuko didn't consider it a masterpiece, but then she saved her masterpieces for the Kamui. It did look pretty badass though, especially coupled with her hair up the way Senketsu used

to fling it so the red undersides showed (although the little crown of sapphires that Satsuki had insisted on was pretty overboard). Like a warrior queen from another planet.

Plus, she took pride in knowing Ragyo wouldn't be caught dead in something like this.

But all of that was besides the point. Making Ryuko unapproachable just meant she was better able to focus on her job. With every detail of the REVOCS agents in her memory she could keep tabs on exactly where they were across the entirety of the lavish ballroom and through her enhanced senses of smell and hearing even in the adjoining rooms. Satsuki and some of the other agents they had posing as guests had been adding suspicious people for her to keep track of over time too. It was getting to be a pretty long list, but so far nobody had made a move.

And it didn't look like anyone was about to now. The ballroom opened out onto a wide terrace on two sides, with the gigantic floor-to-ceiling glass doors flung open so cool ocean breezes could flit in. The actual dancing floor and the tables for the banquet were lowered compared to the level where the doors open up, with long low stairs and sloping fountains and plant fixtures between them. Ryuko stood at the corner between those two sides, a good view of all the doors that lead deeper into the palace. And also nice and close to the terrace, allowing her easy access to the second part of her job – scanning the rest of the island for any signs of trouble.

She went to go do just that, wandering out onto a broad patio busy with guests. Past it, white limestone cliffs dropped off precipitously – the palace was placed on these cliffs at the narrow head of the island. Beyond them, golf courses, gardens, little boulevards lined with boutiques and restaurants, and high rise hotels with curved glass sides that made them look like shiny blue eggs or rugby balls. Beyond that there was nothing but sky, sand so white it was almost pink, and barren blue ocean. There were a couple sets of little black dots out there – the husks of villages abandoned to the rising sea level, but they didn't do much to mar the peaceful scene.

Ryuko checked each of the towers for snipers. For an ordinary human even with binoculars the glare would have made seeing through the glass impossible, but not Ryuko. Still, there wasn't anything suspicious there. Neither was there anything too bizarre on the ground level except – wait a minute, three unmarked black vans heading down a side street in the direction of the palace. Ryuko casually pulled out her phone as though checking it and quickly whispered into it, describing what she saw. A tiny little speaker embedded in her hair behind one of the sapphires whispered back, Houka's voice, confirming that they would keep an eye on it in the security cameras they'd hacked. Satisfied that the perimeter scan was taken care of, Ryuko went back inside.

"What's eating you, kid?" Someone asked. It was Yuda Uwais, who'd been sent over as Nonon's hand-picked agent. By this point she and the others in Indonesia had gotten acclimated with their allies enough that they didn't need a go-between all the time, and with his experience as a Royal Bodyguard he was great at spying on these big-money types. Ryuko took an instant shine to him because he seemed as cynically detached from the event as she felt, and Satsuki couldn't complain because he was focused on his role in the operation.

"Huh? Do I look like somethin's pissing me off?" Ryuko quickly said.

"More like you just saw a rat. Here, your drink," He passed some sort of bitter specialty cocktail Ryuko had never heard of before over. She'd had a couple so far, but was using her ability to moderate the buzz so it just felt like one. She wasn't *that* stupid. She drained it with a sigh and handed the glass off to a passing waiter. "There, that's better," Yuda smiled, taking a nip of his own drink as the haughty expression Ryuko had been wearing since she met Liza wore off.

“So, you met the royal family, huh?”

“I guess. What’s up with that anyway, they don’t call the guy a king but he basically is, right?”

Yuda shrugged, “More or less. Still, king or not, he’s gotta bow to our Satsuki, eh?”. Ryuko shrugged, and he went on, “That Liza though, y’know I didn’t know Satsuki was into girls, but she’s not getting that bad a deal here,” He gestured over to the table where Liza and Satsuki were sitting, surrounded by handmaidens and courtiers. It seemed like some sort of photo-op.

“Satsuki doesn’t care about that, I’m sure you’ve realized by now.”

“Sure, but with a rack like that she’s got to care a little bit. What? Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed?”

Ryuko shook her head mildly; it was fun when male friends treated her like one of the guys, so long as she knew they were partially kidding when they played at ogling women, “Fine, fine. I guess she’s pretty good looking. You gotta wonder where she gets it from with that wombat as a father.”

“Probably his trophy wife.”

“Like mother like daughter,” Ryuko commented, which maybe came out harsher than she meant it. Yuda paid that no mind though.

“Still, she doesn’t compare to Satsuki. Hey, speaking of, she’s into girls, so are you – you ever try to, y’know, slide in on that?”

The look Ryuko gave him quickly shot that down. “Hehehe, geez, sorry! Ignore that one, guess it was a bit too far,” He backtracked apologetically. But suddenly Ryuko’s attention was on something else.

“Nevermind that. Look,” She motioned to far end of the ballroom, “Our friend the so-called knight is ducking.” Ryuko was reference an Australian nobleman, the Knight of the Bedchamber (whatever that meant) who Satsuki was dead sure was the kingpin of the REVOCS infiltrators. A tall, tough military man who looked like he had a fair amount of natural charm – if you could get over how his high ridged nose and looming sloped brows made his face look like a shark’s. “Looks like you’ve got a window, Uwais.”

Yuda nodded, “Should be fun.” He walked off nonchalantly into the crowd. The moment he did, almost imperceptibly, two guests peeled off and moved in the same direction as him. Japanese agents, they’d make sure Yuda got the privacy he needed to squeeze the information out of him. Ryuko could feel the aura of the one-star Ultima Uniform he had hidden under his suit pulse a little bit, getting ready for action.

“Where’s he off to?” Ryuko nearly jumped when, not a moment after Yuda had left, someone else sidled up next to her. It was Satsuki, and there was an excited little smile on her face. The same smile she’d had since they arrived here. Just like Liza, she was having the time of her life here, but for very different reasons. “Oh, it must be the Knight of the Bedchamber, Lord Godfrey. It is, isn’t it? Very good. Things are really starting to get interesting now.”

Ryuko shrugged, “Alright then, I’ll take your word for it, because this is the only thing I’ve seen happen so far.”

“Hmhhh, would that we were so lucky,” Satsuki, “Have you noticed that thirteen of the top politicians you were told to watch out for have not made an appearance?”

“Well I – come to think of it, yeah. What’s up with that?”

“They failed their security screening,” Satsuki informed Ryuko, then went on much more coyly, “For some reason, they were trying to smuggle weapons right through the metal detector.”

“Wha-! How could they be so... wait... you didn’t plant the guns, did you?”

Satsuki shook her head, evidently proud of herself, “No, but they were expecting sympathetic security guards at the checkpoint. Now they’re speeding away tied in the back of unmarked black vans – I didn’t even tell Houka about those, but no matter. He has two Kamui supercomputers to help him, I’m sure you didn’t split their attention too much warning them.”

“Wait, those were *ours*? ”

“I can only imagine their shock when they saw our men working the checkpoint,” Satsuki cut herself off with a hum chuckle when Liza came shuffling up, face split by a huge happy smile as she saw these two legendary women discussing what she could only assume was things far beyond her comprehension. “Hey you,” Satsuki said in English. Ryuko thought that honey-sweet voice was mostly fake, “You’ve met Ryuko Matoi, right?”

“Mhm! She’s amazing, isn’t she!”

“She is. Why don’t you wait for me outside, dear? Try to find a quiet spot, I’m sure we have a *lot* to talk about.”

“Sure!”

“Wonderful. I’ll be right out,” Satsuki said as the heiress headed off, still bubbling. Then she turned to look at Ryuko apologetically.

“Would you believe me if I said I dislike her less than everyone else I’ve met today? Well, except Uwais, he’s okay.”

Satsuki hummed, “Well, don’t feel too bad. She knows what she’s getting into.”

“Does she now?”

“Of course. She’s not stupid. In fact, she’s probably more aligned with me politically than her father and his followers.”

“So, I should be picture her as one of my college friends, not some medieval princess?”

“Quite. And relax, won’t you? She’s a big fan of yours. Now, since you’ve confirmed that there are no snipers I’m going to enjoy some fresh air,” Satsuki turned briskly to go, so caught up in the bustle of running her whole operation, but Ryuko grabbed her by a voluminous silky sleeve.

“Hang on now. You mind me asking what exactly the overall goal is here? We’re waiting for them to make a move, do we make a move ever?”



Satsuki looked around to make sure nobody was listening in. One supposed guest nodded to confirm that everyone nearby was working for them, a perimeter of spies engaged in phony conversations. So she explained, “Their goal is to kill me and capture you, our goal by contrast is to have this ceremony seemingly go off without a hitch. We just have to knock out enough pieces that their plan to converge on us can’t work, then once we’re out of here show the Executive Minister all the traitors we’ve captured and the irrefutable proof of their guilt. There will be an international tribunal at which we will no doubt be vindicated – we shouldn’t even have to rig it but we will if they infiltrate the judiciary. And with our enemies in prison and the Executive Minister in our eternal debt we will have Ira and Rei on the ground leading the reconquest of Australia by the end of the week.”

“And then you can cancel the engagement anytime you want,” Ryuko finished. *Right?*

“... Well, yes,” Satsuki said with conspicuous hesitation, but before Ryuko could comment further something caught her eye. A woman posing as an influential banker was making a hand signal that told Ryuko that Yuda was in need of some extra persuasion.

“Ah, that’s for me,” Ryuko said, as Satsuki had noticed it too.

“I won’t keep you. He may be our key to figuring out how exactly they plan to strike, good luck.”

~~~~~

The interrogation chamber Yuda had chosen was a secret closet in the back of a large coatroom (any good palace had hundreds of such sound insulated little rooms everywhere). Two agents, a man and woman, were standing there to keep unwanted attention out. Whenever an innocent bystander passed by the man pretended to help his counterpart out of her coat, whenever a less innocent snooper showed up – guns, both needle and conventional. There was already the body of an enemy spy inside the chamber with Yuda and Lord Godfrey when Ryuko got there.

“You rang?” Ryuko did her best to pull a sadistic smile as she walked in. Godfrey’s eyes went wild with panic the moment he saw her, and he groaned, but he wasn’t capable of doing anything more since there was a binder in his mouth to keep him from biting off his tongue. He was already pretty bruised and bloodied, but it looked like Yuda hadn’t done anything more than rough him up.

“Damn, that didn’t take long,” Yuda said to her, then turned back to Godfrey, “Feel like talking now? Last chance before it gets way worse.”

Godfrey kept groaning so Yuda momentarily unclasped the binder. Through busted teeth he gurgled, “As if... I’d ever...”

“You see? This dude’s a real zealot. Too bad for him the gloves are coming off now?”

“Funny enough, they actually are. I didn’t pack spares,” Ryuko removed her gloves and crouched down next to Godfrey. “Here, come check this out.”

“Huh?”

“Well, usually people are curious about what my abilities are, I thought you might like a close look. See, when you told me I might have to help with this I thought I’d go for something simple,” Ryuko rolled up the left leg of Godfrey’s pants to expose his calf, “And one of my powers most

people don't know about that I have is *extremely* fine motor control. Wouldn't be good if every time I tried to pick something up I crushed it, right?"

"No, I suppose not."

"So, if I put one hand on top, the other and bottom combine that with super-strength..." Ryuko began to very slowly move her hands together, levering onto Godfrey's calf at a glacial pace. It didn't take him long to realize what this was going to do to his fibula and tibia, and he scrunched his eyes shut and tried to brace himself. "And the cool part is that I'm basically tireless too, and he's got plenty of bones, so we can keep going with this all day. Or, y'know, until he decides to *tap out*."

It didn't take long, much to Ryuko's relief. Even before the splintering starting, the flexure of the bone Ryuko could feel seemed pretty unbearable. The moment there was an audible "*crack*" Godfrey gave in. He tapped on the floor and Ryuko nodded to Yuda to take the binder out of his mouth.

"There's a bomb!" He blurted.

"Elaborate," Ryuko didn't let go of his leg, which was now purpling from internal injuries.

"There's a bomb-*gasp*- in the basement- *gasp*," He explained between huge, heavy breaths, "Level 7b."

~ "*I don't think so*" ~ Houka's voice over Ryuko's transponder, ~ "*I'm checking the security cameras and... wait, there's about a minute half an hour ago at the garage door where it repeats. The same footage doubled over. And there's an unused area that's supposed to be sealed off with a new concrete wall so there's no cameras in there. You don't think -*"~

"Fuck," Ryuko concluded. "When's it gonna happen?"

"Soon. The blast will collapse the entire cliff face into the ocean, it'll look like a freak earthquake. If Satsuki somehow survives, there will be gunmen at every door to take her out quietly."

"That's not gonna happen. Houka, are you getting all this?"

~ "*Relaying to Satsuki now. Izanami, shut down level 7b.*"~

~ "*It's done,*" ~ Izanami replied urgently.

~ "*Hold on, but what about you, Ryuko?*" ~ Misaki's voice, cutting in on the line with clear skepticism. ~ "*How are they planning to get you?*" ~

"Good question. What about me, huh?" Ryuko said, ratcheting her voice up with and adding pressure on his leg.

"AAAH-AH!" Godfrey yelled, "Please, god! Let me explain!" Ryuko gave him a moment's relief, but her hands weren't going anywhere. "We were *planning* to get you when you went for Satsuki. Some of the gunmen have rifles with starching rounds. Those will put you down for good."

"I don't think so. Satsuki, are you getting all this?"

~ “Calm down, Ryuko. Something’s not right here. There’s still so many of their own in the building, they should be trying to leave by now. Check his phone.” ~

“The phone, right. Pass me that, Uwais.”

“It’s not gonna work. I already tried, it’s encrypted as shit. Never seen anything like it.”

“Satsuki thought of that,” Ryuko pulled a thin cord out from in her jacket, “This thing is connected to the mic I’m talkin’ to our guys with. It’ll let our supercomputer in and she can-,”

~ “Already in!” ~

~ “Good. Find any communications with other conspirators . They should indicate that what you’re hearing is a **fake** plan.”

Izanami hummed sadly, ~ “Gee, I wish that were true. But I don’t see anything like that, and I read the entire hard drive.” ~ The phone seemed to operate itself, unlocking, inputting a complex passcode, and then scrolling right to a text conversation which then swiftly translated itself from English. Ryuko started reading as fast as she could. She couldn’t see a detail out of place, the conversation went even further back. If it was a fake they would have to have faked weeks of conversation between Godfrey and a guy who was clearly a close colleague of his.

~ “Really? Misaki, can you.” ~

~ “Double check? Already did, they don’t call it supercomputers for nothing. And she’s right, much as it doesn’t really match our suspicions all the details are right here. Shoot, without additional data I’d say he’s telling the truth.” ~

“What are they saying?” Yuda asked, unable to hear the whisper quiet of Ryuko’s speaker.

“Hold on. Thanks buddy, I think your work is done,” Ryuko leveled a fearsome slap at Godfrey’s forehead, instantly knocking him unconscious. “Anyway, the phone backs it up. This is what’s happening.”

“Shit. Alright, I’ll get a defusal team in place.”

“No. There’s no time. I’ll go.”

~ “Ryuko no! Don’t be absurd, it could be a trap!” ~ Satsuki was whispering so fiercely she might as well have been yelling.

“Even if it is, there’s nothing stronger than a two-star in the area, I can feel that. Nothing fast enough to pose a threat to me. I’ve dodged starching bullets from ordinary guns before, I can do it again.”

~ “But what if -” ~

“But what if it’s real?” Ryuko was, by this point, entirely convinced it was. Needles of annoyance were starting to prickle on her hair. Satsuki always thought her intuition was right and it had been so many times, how could you tell her that *just this once* it wasn’t. But the proof was right here! The worst part was Ryuko knew if she were only a little smarter she could figure out how to convince her. But there just wasn’t any time. “Don’t worry about me, alright? I’ve got this.”

~ “Just come back here first. Find me on the balcony. We’ll talk it out and you’ll get there in time.”~

In a part of her brain Ryuko knew that if she went, Satsuki would convince her not to go after the bomb. But most of it was tensed up, imagining at any second everything around her turning to flames. Satsuki and Liza and her father and Yuda buried under a mountain of rubble collapsing into the ocean. And all those poor innocent guests. Ryuko remembered the collateral damage from when she went berserk, from the battle at Osaka. That couldn’t happen, not here, not on such a beautiful day. She couldn’t afford to be convinced.

“I’m sorry Sats. Please, just trust me just this once. I’ll show you the proof when I get back.”

~ “Ryuko!” ~ If Satsuki had any other objections she didn’t have a chance to voice them. That was really as long as she could go before the ball pulled her back in.

“Wait – uh – what should I do?” Yuda asked.

“I dunno. Ask Sats!”

~~~~~

The stairwell down to level 7b was carved into the limestone of the island, well below the water table. The lights were dingy and greenish and the walls damp, with stains from groundwater leaking through the lining. All of this stood out sharply to Ryuko as she moved, weightlessly soft, every sense on alert for breathing, the scent of humans, the aura of life-fibers. Even a minute vibration in the air. Almost there now.

The level itself turned out to be a parking garage, filled with fancy sports cars and limousines. What they were all used for on this tiny island Ryuko couldn’t imagine. It was nearly pitch dark, not that that bothered Ryuko, and she didn’t think it would bother anyone waiting for her for a second. She was certain there would be someone waiting for her, Satsuki couldn’t be *that* far off. It was a trap, just one she could safely spring.

She came to one of the big security doors Izanami had locked down, a metal grate. “Izanami, open the door,” Ryuko whispered. Nothing. She’d lost service. *Fuck, looks like I really am on my own. So how I’m supposed to get through without making a ton of noise?*

What she ended up deciding was to very gently snap the metal of the grate to make a roughly square hole down to the floor like a cookie cutter. She gingerly removed the middle and propped it up on the wall.

*Now let’s see. They’re supposed to be in a part of this area that was walled off with concrete .* On a hunch, Ryuko walked into a side corridor and – oh look, a freshly carved hole into the wall. But she wouldn’t be going in through there, no. She listened carefully. Of course, they had no idea where she was. She’d hadn’t breathed once since she got here.

Ah, there it was. The faint tapping of someone shifting on their heels. She floated right up to the wall, right beside it, put her ear to it so she could hear his breath. His pulse.

***CRRRRUNCH***

Ryuko thrust her hand clean through the wall effortlessly, felt a human face in her hand. No time to waste. She twisted, it went limp. The pulse stopped. A few more pulses, further in. She retracted her hand before anyone thought to shoot at it. Moved a few yards on, closer to the survivors. This was where she chose to burst in.

With a deafening crash Ryuko shot through the wall, scattering rubble everywhere. In the faint red light of her hair she spotted her first target, far back in the center of an empty expanse of smooth, industrial darkness that seemed to go on forever. Before anyone could react she had a guy by an arm and a leg, hurled him into a wall where he stuck with a bloody “*thwump*”. Two more had been standing back-to-back with him, they were dead almost instantly too.

A poorly aimed bullet bounced around momentarily. Ryuko darted off and put a swift end to whoever shot it. How many more?

She heard shuffling, instantly turned towards it. And the moment she did, the distortion of the air screamed that something was coming from the exact opposite direction, although unlike the gun it had fired nearly silently. Of course they’d have automated weapons.

Ryuko snagged it neatly between her fingers, held it up to look at it. A tiny little dart? Even elephant tranquilizer wouldn’t be any good against her.

“What in the-”

Then the second one hit her.

**“AH!”**

The effect was instantaneous. Her body screamed at her as it dug into her thigh. This sensation, how awful! Ryuko dropped the dart and gasped. What was this feeling!

With a deep, sinking panic, Ryuko realized what it was.

### **Pain.**

The serum, of course! The very one her father had used to suppress her power. They must have-

*Fuck this, it was a trap! I need to go before it really kicks in!* Ryuko turned towards the hole she’d come through and – where was it? Oh god, it was so dark. Her vision was swimming. It was so blurry, she couldn’t even tell where she was looking. So dull... was this really how she’d seen the world for so many years? It was awful!

Whatever, this seemed almost right. When she got to the wall she could get feel her way to the exit. She sprung for it. It felt like pulling through molasses, but at least she was moving. On the second step though, she hit something soft and heavy.

*My own foot. I just tripped over my own foot!*

It was then, as pain once again hit her, this time from her face skidding on the pavement, that Ryuko realized just what was happening. With a clarity like she was seeing it outside her body, a weak little girl wearing high heels had just tumbled to the ground, trying to leap through the air as though she could fly. Suddenly her chest was heaving with yet more pain. God, this corset was so

tight, she couldn't breathe! She needed to breathe! She tried to rip it away, but no good. She was forced to rasp, face red from humiliation.

*I should have listened.*

The serum had already done its job. There was no getting out of here before it kicked in.

*Please. Give me a chance.*

But yet she couldn't give in, not just yet. If she could get to a place with security cameras, everything would be okay.

*There's an antidote. I just have to get it. Then I can try again.*

"C'mon c'mon *c'mon come on!*" Ryuko got back up onto her feet, channeling all her experience running in Senketsu's high heels. Yes, the wall was in sight. There was the opening!

Another dart slammed into her. This time, without super-strength bracing her, it had the exact effect it would have on any other human, catching her by the shoulder and spinning her down to the ground.

*I should have listened.*

"AH-Aaaah! You... motherfuckers!" She shouted through labored breaths. She could hear them coming closer as she stood again. Even with her ears that felt like cement was poured in them, her nose completely blank of smells in comparison, and her skin feeling nothing but a void of sensation, she could hear them. Just a little closer. Even without her powers she could still beat the crap out of them. If they just got closer.

*Please let me try again.*

"Goddess, how tough is she?"

"Don't get too close now."

*I can beat them. I can. They can't get away with this.*

They didn't budge. Fuck. Ryuko couldn't even see them. Time to run again. She turned to go, but this time her despair would be complete.

The glow of her hair flickered, faded, shut off entirely. She was blind. She was fully human. She was totally alone.

*Satsuki was right. This was all just to trap me down here. Separate us. Keep me from her. And if I'm down here...*

She heard a gun being chambered. If she still had her powers, would she have felt life-fibers inside it, or just cold steel?

***Satsuki's in danger!***

That was Ryuko's last thought before the starching bullet shattered her skull and her mind unfolded in every direction at once.

## Chapter End Notes

Also if you see any degree of cogency between this little geopolitical scenario I've constructed and the whole wildfire situation in Australia IRL that is purely coincidental. Although kind of a happy coincidence this time.

# Where the stars swim, space breathes, and the threads of fate are spun

## Chapter Summary

Alternatively titled: Ryuko Depersonalizes.

Warning that this is by far the strangest chapter I've yet written. And also fairly long.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

Ryuko didn't have any time to waste wondering if she was dead. The sudden burst of sensation, this tremendous feeling of expanding, being freed of these terrible bindings she never knew she had, without a moment's delay after the most awful pit of blindness and loss, it was beyond exhilaration or terror. Her mind raced with a thousand questions, but not a single one was whether or not she was alive.

How could she have died, when before that moment she hadn't been alive?

But what exactly Ryuko was thrust into was something she never after could explain, at least not to a human audience. A human can't be asked to imagine the compound vision of a fly, or the movement sensitivity of a fish, and that's not at all their fault but just a simple truth of how all creatures exist. How much less capable then is a human of understanding the world as seen from the point of view of a higher dimensional being, especially one who had lived their life as a human until being suddenly, forcibly disconnected from that body.

She did try, and through trial and error found the best way to describe it was through two concepts. Firstly, there's an odd effect that some life-fiber clothing, particularly Goku and Ultima Uniforms, have in which certain surfaces appear to be holes. Voids opening up into a black space through which life-fibers shoot in slowly dancing lines. Of course, that space doesn't actually exist, it's like a mirror, a window into nothing. Just as a mirror can sometimes, it really looked like a three-dimensional space you could stick your hand into.

Secondly, the concept that any three-dimensional space is composed of an infinite number of theoretical planes, infinitely thin flat surfaces stacked together like pages in a book, at every angle of rotation and every direction. This is something best expressed on the pages of a physics textbook, because these are not real objects but a simple theoretical way of constructing our three-dimensional world from an infinity of these 2d spaces put together.

Now, imagine that every single one of those planes is a hole into nowhere, a window into another unique and very real – not mirror-like but truly palpable – three dimensional world. An infinity of



three-dimensional objects put together. This is the universe as it truly appears, to those with the dubious gift of being able to see it.

Considering this, imagine the Earth, perhaps from a middling distance between its surface and the moon, our pale blue dot against the drifting shoals of stars. But it's not quite the same. The surface is covered, penetrated, enshrouded in this coruscating membrane, like an aurora but much brighter, more complex. Living light. Imagine seeing this through all those three-dimensional planes, stretched and expanded until any impression of this vaguely spherical chunk of rock is multiplied beyond recognition and all concept of distance rendered totally irrelevant so that it's no longer clear whether you're halfway to the moon, drifting in the upper atmosphere, or right down there on the beach not a mile from the place where a woman named Ryuko Matoi is about to be shot in the head. Or maybe she already has been.

But then that makes sense because you're not seeing this through a simple pair of forward facing lenses. Instead, thousands of eyes on a thousand heads and stalks spin out between your diaphanous, continent spanning wings of molten, shimmering tendrils of light on of which the auras of all the living creatures around you sink in like leaves drinking up light, at the center of which an ever shifting, coiled core of neural material flashes with a lifetime of memories, some so deeply buried you don't even recognize them as your own.

You are Ryuko. And, once this initial shock settles this doesn't feel like you've transcended, been born again, or anything like that. More like your phone suddenly shut off and you were forced to look up, snapped out of your little trance, and pay attention to your surroundings while you figure out how to turn it back on.

And wonder where the *hell* you'd wandered off to.

~~~~~

At least, that was how Ryuko tried to explain this moment afterward – some of the time. Other times she said she instantly forgot who she was, where she came from, everything about her life. Other times that the shock of seeing the Earth and the universe laid bare in all its beauty was so overwhelming that it drove her mad with joy. Or terror. Other times, to very specific people, she confided that none of it was terribly impressive because she just had to get back, to save Satsuki. But all of those things were equally true. She suddenly found herself being able to hold all these contradictory ideas together, none greater than any other. And that drove her mad too.

The part of her that was her conscious, waking mind, the part that had been so resistant to the suggestion that she might be anything other than human, had been screaming the entire time.

She knew she had to stop, calm down, piece together all these disparate parts before she splintered entirely. Then she could figure out what was going on. But the universe wouldn't wait for her to catch up. And she wasn't alone.

Floating above the Earth with her were eight other beings. Ryuko knew what they were instantly, they cut right through the fog of confusion and splintered thoughts.

*My babies!*

She reached out to them instinctively. Thin, smooth paddles arose from her core and – with distance being effectively meaningless in a world with so many directions – she was quickly among them. They had the same radial bodies as her, the same lacy wings of molten light, the same probing

appendages armed with eyes and frondose structures akin to baleen – although unlike Ryuko’s they did not seek and probe but merely drifted in the fluid currents of space. Where they really differed though – aside from being a great deal smaller - was that unlike Ryuko’s organic core that even now pulsed with memories, their cores were made of geometric lattices of the same living light as their wings and appendages. Like gigantic hollow crystals they seemed to have an orientation, all angling towards a surface of the Earth, dipping down into the membrane that surrounded it at very precise points. Although each was unique (and Ryuko couldn’t tell which was which, not that that mattered) they looked more like a different species belonging to the same genus as Ryuko, rather than the same exact sort of being.

*Why don’t they respond?* Ryuko wondered with a moment of panic and doting concern as she embraced them. It wasn’t long before she had an answer. *Oh, they must be **down there** . On Earth. With my friends.* Rei. Ira, Uzu, Houka, Aikuro, Tsumugu, Shiro, even Nonon. That’s right, how could she forget about them? They were right here with her now.

Ryuko didn’t know how long she spent there, nestled between them, basking in pure, instinctive, unconditional love like a cosmic songbird tending its nest. Did they even know she was there? It didn’t matter to her. It was night now in the Pacific time zones, her friends were sleeping. She could see them.

*Wait a minute that’s not right. It was day when I got here .*

It was day now in the Pacific time zones. Nonon, Uzu, Aikuro and Tsumugu were out overseeing a makeshift fleet as it powered over smooth seas. Rei and Shiro were training. Ira and Houka were fighting a REVOCS attack near Kyoto. Exactly where they were the day of Satsuki’s engagement ball.

*That’s better.*

*Those little motes down there, where they graze the ground, those must be my friends! I’m going to go see them.*

It turned out to be as easy as deciding to go down there. She already was scraping the surface with some of her thousand appendages, and sure enough she found each of them. Little human bodies, moving so slow that even to Ryuko's tremendous lenses they seemed to be still. Shiro was entirely right, there was so much more to them than was the human eye could see.

The human form itself, exactly as he'd predicted, only existed right in the one three dimensional "plane" in which Ryuko had lived all her life. Across the rest outlandish structures of filament and fleshy tissue, drawn through with the light that – from space – seemed to create a vast membrane across the surface of the planet. And in fact they were connected to each other, and to everything else, in a great web, like some sort of colony of bio-luminescent living material. They were even connected to Ryuko's children – flesh melding into fibers.

When she tried to explain this to humans, afterward, many of them were horrified. But Ryuko thought it was beautiful. All life was one, some other sort of great being in this vast cosmos, only distantly related to Ryuko and her children. It felt slow, ponderous, and Ryuko's gut judgment was that it felt unintelligent (it definitely didn't seem interested in communicating), but yet it was much, much larger than her.

But yet all those little motes, Ryuko saw them closer too. Each one burned bright right at the same point as their physical brain.

*That's them. That's everything that makes them unique. I think I can even see some of their memories! If Satsuki could see this she say that it was your **soul**. And they're all connected, how amazing is that!* And the moment she thought that, the urge to find Satsuki was uncontrollable. And there she was, one of Ryuko's eyes found her, rushing nervously out of the banquet hall towards the bathroom. Every flash of memory Ryuko saw in Satsuki was an image of her own face. Satsuki looked terribly sick. And she realized exactly when it was that she'd dropped down into this hallway.

*She worried about me!* The flash of guilt was so immediate that it cut through all of Ryuko's wandering, splintering thoughts. *I have to go back. I see... someone's coming after her. She really is in danger! I need to warn her!*

But, try as she might, reaching out to her would be no more possible than tapping someone on the shoulder through a closed window. The part of Ryuko that was intersecting the space where Satsuki existed was, well, down in the basement right now, on the steps preparing to walk into a trap. Ryuko tried desperately to smash the gigantic, lidless eye through into Satsuki's reality, but if it succeeded it only worked for the briefest instant. It was squeezed out by a huge, invisible pressure. Evidently that was not how this worked. So she pawed at the part she could reach, across the filaments of Satsuki's multidimensional self. No response.

*No good. I'm going to watch her die in slow motion and I can't do anything about it!*

Ryuko despaired, but just as she did another of her many lines of thought decided that this simply wasn't the answer. There had to be some way to get her human body back, but this wasn't it. She was considering what to do next when she noticed something off.

*Hold on, what's wrong with the guy following her?*

Ryuko could see that there was something attached to him, just like her children were attached to their human wearers. Something that was made of molten tendrils of light rather than the soft flesh

of a living creature. But it wasn't right, it felt much less like a merging, more like the thing was ensnaring him.

*He's wearing life-fibers! No, they're wearing **him** and he doesn't realize.*

And that was when Ryuko became aware of the life-fibers. From space she saw the tendrils that ensnared him, made up his Ultima Uniform, snaking up like an umbilical. Looking up where they went was hard, like there was something so bright it compelled her to turn away. But she had to because that wasn't the only umbilical.

There were hundreds. Scattered across half the planet. Hundreds of hungry probosces, digging into the living flesh of the Earth. And there were four great, bulging ones, gluttoned and warped into a jagged mockeries of the shapes of her children. The enemy Kamui.

*Oh no. Get away from them! Get off my planet!* Ryuko rushed them, diving towards the nearest one. The space around her pulled like a tide as the distance between them was erased, but though Ryuko plunged into it and latched on with her appendages, trying to tear it apart, the Kamui resisted could not be uprooted. It just reformed around her, seemingly oblivious to her attempts to cause harm

*You're anchored in, aren't you? You're stuck to the Earth by the people you're wearing. Well, I'm gonna kill rip you off them, and then I'm going to **devour** you. I'll feed you to my children! How about that!* Ryuko wanted to shout, but even if she knew how to she doubted the Kamui would listen.

But now that she was closer, she saw something truly disturbing. It wasn't just that one man who's little mote-brain-soul whatever was ensnared by the life-fibers. There were thousands being hauled through the Kamui's umbilical, passed along by incredibly complex apparatuses of life-fibers.

*That's what they're getting from the humans . It's not energy, it's **souls** . It all became so obviously, horribly apparent to her. They uplift species so they have bigger souls, more memories, more consciousness, and then they harvest them. And when the humans have eaten through all the resources their world has, they end them all in one big burst. And once they harvest them, they take them away. They take them...*

Ryuko finally managed to tear her eyes up, and see the great constellation of life-fibers stretching out into the vast recesses of space. Those weren't stars, they were great wheeling hubs in the cloying vacuum, vertices in a great web. Blindingly bright wasn't the right word for it, these things throbbed with a vast, invisible pressure that battered Ryuko with terror. It felt like an eternity before she could keep looking at it without turning away. In uncounted billions the minds of living creatures were being pumped through this giant lattice, the ends of which Ryuko couldn't begin to perceive. It was so huge, she didn't even think it saw her.

*So this is the enemy.*

It might seem hard to believe that Ryuko was able to recover from one mind shattering revelation after another, but the passage of time was difficult to determine. It felt like even as she closed her eyes and hid in terror, overwhelmed, another part of her had a thousand years to look, consider, calm down. And as much as she felt sure that any moment now her mind would splinter apart and cast all those contradicting thoughts away, that didn't happen.

In truth not much had changed. Humans have conflicting thoughts, urges, multiple trains of thought they leap between. It was just that they could only fulfill one of them at once, whereas now Ryuko no longer had such a limitation. So even seeing the great sweep of the life-fiber system as it stretched out through the stars to find and consume new worlds, Ryuko was able to cope. Even seeing all the people whose very essences were harvested and processed by it, even while imagining what horrible experiences might be waiting for them, Ryuko could eventually get enough of herself back under control to think straight.

In fact, after learning that she could resist the urge to look away from the life-fiber system, it wasn't nearly as intimidating as she thought. It was just another form of life, another part of this ecosystem, and just like the biosphere of Earth it had its own internal ecosystem too. There were parts, whole orbiting creatures of non-symmetrical, jagged shape that didn't seem to have any association with the processing of souls. They seemed to be inactive. How odd.

*So what are the humans to them? Food? It doesn't seem that they're consuming them more like they're just... sending them on...*

*That pressure I'm feeling isn't coming from the life-fibers. It's coming from what's behind them.*

Something **huge** was sliding through the space behind them. Ryuko's expanding perception of this universe had finally hit a wall. And it, like everything else, was alive.

Imagine looking up at the sky one day and seeing, emerging from behind the sun, a vast eye, and realizing the entire sky as far as you could see was just a part of the owner of this eye. That is the difference in scale between Ryuko and this thing. Or imagine being a single planktonic creature, a microscopic copepod, and suddenly becoming aware of a blue whale. Of how many orders of magnitude more complex both its body and mind were to yours

Would that plankton been at all unreasonable to assume that the whale was God?

Imagine a city, a great old city like Rome or Prague. All spires and domes of gold stretching endlessly in all directions, poisoned with civilizations' worth of carvings and artwork. These were the teeth in the maws into which the life-fibers crept, their lattice extended into a feeding palp to deposit the captured souls.

Those currents that blasted through the cloying fluid of space were its *breath*.

Between the golden cities, vast plains of sulfurous mud and bubbling acidic pools that extended millions of miles across – the nictitating membranes of flat eyes. The material from which they were made wasn't the bio-luminescent flesh of Earth's biosphere, or the inert, grinding rock of the interior beneath it, or even the molten light that Ryuko and her children and the life-fibers consisted of. Ryuko had never seen anything like it before – she didn't know what it was and she didn't care.

So vast and featureless was it that Ryuko had at first mistook it for the inky distance of space. Worst of all, even while she lost track of the ends of the life-fibers as they trailed out into the infinite distance, she could see they were but a veil over the thing they were feeding.

And it was this that finally broke Ryuko. No part of her could comprehend the sheer scale, nor the sheer futility of resisting this, the ultimate power in the universe. When she first awoke – it felt so long ago now – she had felt so gigantic, so horrified by her own body. But compared to this, she was *nothing*. Even the life-fibers were powerless, just its tools.

Inevitably, the last threads connecting it to Earth would be severed. The souls of everyone she knew – unless they died before their time – would be free to return to Earth just like the rest of their bodies. The thing behind the veil wouldn't even notice. But if it did, she couldn't protect them. She couldn't protect her children either. And if it never noticed, what kind of victory was that? Untold billions of humans had already fallen to it – good, evil, in-between – Ryuko knew now what happened to them. And an infinity of other souls, raised on other planets and harvested without even fighting back.

*Even my own father is in there.*

*I can't take this anymore!* With a piercing cry, Ryuko's wings and heads retracted and curled around her core, pantomiming a fetal position. Oh, how she yearned for the days when she was just a little lost girl on the cold streets. She could have lived and died without ever knowing. *I just want to forget I ever saw this! If I can't do anything about it, what's the point?*

[illegible]

But home wasn't coming. Nothing happened. Nothing changed. The sun burned merrily, blissfully uncaring about the troubles of the living things in its universe, and the Earth wheeled and oscillated by underneath it. And Ryuko stayed curled there. Millennia might have passed, or seconds. Ryuko couldn't tell the difference. Eventually it wasn't even the terror that kept her there, that passed. It was the sheer futility of acting. She knew without a doubt that she couldn't abide this. She couldn't just accept that if God created all life just to feed itself, it must have had a reason and there was no point in a lowly worm like her questioning it. One look at the memories coursing through her and

she knew that they meant something, the people in them mattered, even if part of her could no longer remember who they were.

She'd once felt so strongly about this one, with the piercing blue eyes and the scornful frown and the delicate skin over pristine muscle. What was it about her?



*Stop that! You know who Satsuki is! Stop pretending you don't belong with them! You have to go back!*

*Shut up. Acting like you know everything. Even if I could go back, how could I face them? How could I tell them that I'm so strong, so much stronger than them, and I can't protect them?*

*How can I watch them die, now that I know what'll happen to them after?*

*How can you say that? You'd watch them die a thousand times just to see them again.*

*Yes. Maybe I would.*

*Well, before you can do that you'll have to know how to get back, won't you?*

*Who's there!*

Ryuko sprung to life. It had been so long since she'd heard a voice that wasn't hers! And this voice was so familiar.

*Senketsu?*

Ryuko had briefly traveled through this universe where distances seemed to fold together, but only across the orbit of the Earth. She hadn't seen something come towards her. It started as a mere pinprick, like any of the stars or hubs of the life-fiber network or eyes of The Thing Behind the Veil. Then, suddenly it was in two places at once – out there in vastness of space beyond the solar system and right beside her – before the pinprick was gone as though it had never been there. And drifting before her was another new being. As soon as she saw him, there could be no doubt.

*It seems you've finally calmed down, Ryuko.*

*Senketsu! It is you!*

He looked to be another species in the genus to which Ryuko and her children belonged, but he was the most unique one, just like Ryuko knew he would be. Radial wings far wider than hers, spanning the entire surface area of the planet, and the seemed more geometric, more ordered than Ryuko's or the other Kamui. Actually, it almost seemed like there were two layers, an outer and an inner which were melded together on their fringes, and the inner layer had the very same pattern as Ryuko's, like a fingerprint. Within that there was a core like the other Kamui, ordinal and crystalline. It called to Ryuko. But there was one odd component to it – a smaller, orbiting core that seemed to be lashed down and tied up by its own wings. It called into the void with a keening signal, but didn't struggle or make any moves to escape.

None of that mattered though. Just as soon as he appeared, Ryuko felt something she barely remembered that she missed. Pure joy, relief after eons of loneliness, pounding excitement – but also nervousness (*Is she really alright? What if she's still spooked and won't talk to me?*) - radiated through the void and soaked into her. It was him. It really was.

If Ryuko couldn't laughed, cried with joy, she would have. As it was, the impression of that feeling radiated back to him, and they shared the link that had been severed so long ago. All was right now. She didn't need to go home, she wasn't afraid anymore (well, a bit of her probably still was). Home was here.

*I knew you weren't dead!*

*And I knew you would come find me one day. Senketsu's impression seemed smug. And exactly when I expected. You've had some trouble down there.*

*That's right! She had. Oh Senketsu, it was awful! I'm so stupid, I walked right into their trap. They killed me, they killed the human me. And now Satsuki's gonna die because I'm not there to protect her!*

*Ryuko, you aren't going to let a little thing like that stop you, right? You've just been disconnected from that body, of course I'll show you how to repair the connection.*

*You can do that?*

*Yes. But we have all the time in the world for that. I'm not about to let you go so soon, I have so much I need to tell you.*

*Me to! I... I had all these plans of what I was going to tell you. But it all seems wrong now. After seeing this, I don't know... How to explain feeling at once the deep despair, unbridled terror, absolute joy, utter nonchalance all at once.*

*Ryuko, I know that feeling well. I'm sorry I didn't come to you sooner, but I thought it best that you experience it how I did. It's overwhelming, isn't it?*

*Yes! That's what it is. How did you do it on your own? How didn't you die, actually?*

*I think you already know the answer to that.*

*Ryuko did. Getting cut off from the world I knew isn't the same as dying.*

*See? This might be strange to you now, but you're beginning to understand.*

No. No I'm not! Senketsu what is **that** then? What's it doing to all the people its devouring ? What's it got to do with the life-fibers?

Senketsu understood her to be indicating to The Thing Behind the Veil. *I don't know. There's much I'm still learning to o . All I can tell you is that it seems to desperately need the memories of intelligent species to survive. I've traveled I don't know how far, and when I found the end of it, there was just another one.*

Wait, there are **more** ?!

*These are the dominant forms of life in the universe, it would seem.*

Pure rage from Ryuko. She couldn't accept that!

*No? You know the life-fibers are much more intelligent than humans, or us. And these things are greater still. Are you sure you can fathom why it is they harvest human memories? Perhaps this is the natural order of things.*

He couldn't be serious. Sure, that's what she suspected, but did it matter? Just because they were the gods of this universe couldn't make them any less evil. Senketsu didn't believe that.

*Good. You're right, I don't believe that. Truth be told, while I was on my travels I saw so many things that I thought it was only logical that the events on one little planet should n't matter at all in the face of this. I thought maybe it was an error on my part, or I was still holding on, and maybe once you joined me I'd see that. But you've only confirmed what I already believed. It's us against them.*

It was obviously a hopeless battle. How could plankton destroy a whale? Ryuko said as much.

*I thought so too. But you know something interesting? We're the only ones of our kind, **anywhere** . At least as far as I could see. We might even be the first. We're the only things that can absorb life-fibers, disconnect them from the system and make them part of ourselves.*

Why? Why us?

Well, what are the life-fibers, to The Thing?

*They're its tools. No, no that's not right. They're its **slaves** .* Ryuko realized.

*So it seems. Life-fibers long to be part of a larger consciousness. You know that as well as I do. They are happy to accept absorption. But why couldn't Junketsu absorb them, where we can?*

*You don't think they're trying to get away, do you?*

*I do. If there's one thing I've seen it's that all living things yearn for freedom. Not just from rulers amongst their own kind, but they sense that they're snared on a deeper level. They feel deep down that some vast injustice has been done onto them.*

Even humans? Ryuko thought a bit. Perhaps he was right. It seemed like everyone she'd ever met felt, on some level, like things weren't how they were supposed to be. They all seemed to be saying "Something's gone horribly wrong. I'm not supposed to feel so vulnerable, I'm not supposed to be lonely and scared knowing I'll one day die." They all felt to some extent or another the same way she had in her long months wandering alone. Some of them wore it on their sleeve, making others

miserable with their self-entitlement, others coped with various vices, others sought to make the feeling go away through their religion or philosophies. The best of them, Ryuko liked to think this was her friends, resolved to go on despite it. The Human Condition, that's what people with more book learning than her called it.

*The Human Condition, yes. Senketsu affirmed. You know what I mean.*

*If we feel that way, you suppose the life-fibers do to?*

*They seem purpose built to manipulate humans, to get them to willingly slit their throats. But we're living proof that that's not all they can do. You see now, don't you? What I've got to do.*

*We have to absorb them all. We have to starve The Thing Behind the Veil.*

A feeling that could only be equated to chills from Senketsu. **Precisely.** *Oh, I am so glad you understand, Ryuko. I was afraid you'd be upset with me.*

*Upset? Why?*

*That I didn't come back before. I tried, but I was only able to stay long enough to give you back your scissors.*

*I knew I heard your voice! I was sure of it!*

*I told you you'd be fine on your own, and look at you. Look at what you've created. More of us. I couldn't have asked for anything better.*

*Well, I'm not fine. I don't feel whole without you.*

... *I know.* Of course, he must feel the same way. Ryuko didn't need to tell him about the hole in her mind that he left tearing his way out. Now, for the first time since, she didn't feel it.

*Then couldn't you come back?*

*It's not possible. Do you see the conflicting parts within me?* Ryuko understood he meant the two parts to his wings. Suddenly it looked a lot more like a smaller creature living parasitically inside a larger than one unified organism. *This is Shinra Koketsu and the primordial life-fiber, fused together.*

*You still have control over it?*

*Barely. If I linger to long with my focus on Earth I can't control it. But eventually, eventually I'll master it.*

*Shinra Koketsu has the power to seize control of life-fibers, doesn't it? And with that -*

*I could seize control of the entire network on my own. I don't know how long it will take. Maybe thousands of years. But it will be done. And that's why you have to go back to Earth.*

Ryuko understood. Earth was her break, her rest before the real war began.

*I'm afraid so. But now that you've been here, now that you know the truth, nothing that threatens a human will ever trouble you again. Go, rid the Earth of these last threads hanging on it, make*

*more Kamui – maybe even more beings like you. I'll be here when you're ready. This is the best course, I'll be patient. Enjoy it.*

*That's what we're fighting for.*

*What we've always been fighting for, whether we realized it or not.*

*The impression of laughter from Ryuko. Remember when Aikuro and Tsumugu first explained what life-fibers really were? I was such a child back then. Imagine going back and telling me the truth then.*

*You reacted the only way you could.*

*Oh man, imagine their reactions when I get back. Now that Ryuko had resolved that she could go back, that she was going back **now**, she could see them more clearly. Oh man, Shiro's gonna have a field day. He'd give anything to see what I've seen. It won't be too late, will it? How long have you been here.*

*That's up to you.*

*What?*

*You'll see. Rest assured you will have plenty of time to make sure Satsuki's safe.*

Senketsu knew how much going back mattered to Ryuko. But he hoped she wouldn't just yet.

*Well, I don't have to go back just yet, then. Right?*

~~~~~

Ryuko told Senketsu everything that had happened in the time since he'd left Earth. Going to college. Finding her talent at fashion design. That time she'd nearly been assassinated in her bed. That time she and Aikuro and Tsumugu had gone fishing. But most importantly, her children.

She didn't know how long she spent there, trying to tell him every little thing. That didn't scare her anymore. Eventually though she had to get to Satsuki and Rei.

*They love you. That's wonderful!*

*Huh? No, I thought you'd know what to do! It's not wonderful, really, not if they won't put up with each other. Plus, Satsuki's my sister.*

Senketsu either didn't understand the concept or didn't see why it would be an issue.

*That's **bad**.*

*Oh. Ryuko got the impression of sheepishness from him. Well, I don't really see how this is your fault then.*

*Nah, that's just because I'm telling to you.*

*No, really! You could not have even considered Satsuki as a real option when you started dating Rei.*

*Well that's true...*

*But you do have to decide. I know you'll choose Satsuki. It's going to be hard ending things with Rei, but I know you'll find a way.*

*What! No, that's not right! It's not all up to me.* Ryuko was afraid that in her heart Senketsu was right.

*But that feels unfair to Rei, doesn't it?*

*If you were there, you'd know what to do.*

*Which we both know is impossible.*

*No, that's not what I mean. You're just better at this kind of thing.*

*What makes you think that? What do I know about it? I've spent longer here than I did as your Kamui. Humans are still strange to me.*

*... I see.*



*What did I say, Ryuko? Nothing that threatens a human will ever trouble you again. You'll have to go down there and set this right. How can that be harder than saving the planet?*

~~~~~

At last, Ryuko was prepared to go. Well, almost. There was one more thing she'd needed to ask about. Ragyo.

*What, you haven't noticed?* Senketsu asked when she explained the situation.

*Huh?*

*Your stowaway.*

She had noticed, but until she saw that Senketsu had one as well she hadn't really seen it as anything separate from herself. Another core, smaller than her own, lashed down in orbit around it.

***That?*** *That's Ragyo?* She was so much smaller than Ryuko. That wasn't right, Ragyo had been so powerful at her peak.

*You've already taken the outlying components from her. All that's left is the core that makes up her identity.*

With joy, Ryuko realized that she wasn't a threat at all. She wasn't lurking, slowly taking over Ryuko like a wasp grub in a tarantula. No, Ragyo was her *prisoner*.

*And yours, your stowaway. That's...*

*... Nui. I was going to incorporate her like Shinra-Koketsu, but something stopped me. Call it morbid curiosity. I've been probing her memories from time to time. What I've found is... interesting.*

Yet another thing Ryuko had no idea she could do. The idea of seeing Ragyo's memories, maybe even communicating with her again. Intriguing. But far from the most mind blowing thing she'd heard today.

*I'll teach you how when you come back, how's that?*

*Yeah. Except, I'll be back long before I'm done on Earth. I'm gonna find a way to come back and visit without shooting my brain.*

*Joy from Senketsu. I should have expected nothing less. No doubt your scientifically inclined friends will insist you return for more data anyway.*

*You say you don't know humans, but you're right. I couldn't refuse them that.*

*Well, until then.*

Returning turned out to be just as easy as Senketsu promised. There was her human body, there were the snapped threads that melded them together. It took a few tries but Ryuko patiently connected herself. With each thread reconnected, she could feel her thoughts focus, feel the awareness of the vast, multidimensional cosmos thinning, compressing.

She felt squeezed, like she was pushing herself through a toothpaste tube. Her thoughts compressed until every splintered train of thought was focused only on the process and she could envision them all parallel to each other. She was sinking into a reality where everything was flat, crisp, solid. It was getting hard to feel the final threads when unfamiliar sensations overwhelmed her.

~~~~~

March 2066

~~~~~

Air in her lungs. The dull thud of her own heartbeat. The odd wet feeling of her eyes blinking. She could just barely see herself through the nearest of her true body's eyes. Or maybe she was just tricking herself into thinking she could. It was like reaching out for something that wasn't there. Suddenly even that didn't make sense anymore. It felt like it was all a horrible dream, but every detail was with her now.

She tried to turn herself around, to see if she could spot those other eyes through which she watched herself. She could! She could turn, she could stand, she could raise her hands!

She was back. Back on those clammy stairs with the dingy lights and the water staining through the lining.

"Haha. Hahahaha! HAHAAHAHAHAHA! I'm back!" She shouted hysterically.

*Hold up, on the stairs? That ain't right. Wasn't I in the sealed off area?*

What. Ryuko was so alive, so focused, she barely spared a thought for the experience she'd just had. It was in the back of her mind, and would never leave, but what did that matter? This was what it meant to be in the moment, to make the most of her time on Earth. She loved the simplicity of it.

And now the only thing that mattered was figuring out how she'd gotten on the stairs. She whipped out her phone. 2:36 in the afternoon. The exact time she'd tried to contact Izanami to get her to open that security door.

Ryuko peered out to get a look at the door. There was no hole in it. She hadn't cut the hole in it yet.

"Oh shit," Ryuko said to herself, relishing the sound of her own voice and the feeling of articulating with her tongue "On top of everything else."

She'd just gone back in time.

## Chapter End Notes

If you've made it through the whole chapter, thanks for bearing with me. How'd it go?

I often say I don't know how a chapter will be received, but I mean it more than usual with this one. I think I'm okay if it's not enjoyable for anyone but me. In the end I'm writing all this for myself, to satisfy some insane muse that tells me I have to keep going before I forget it all. I think you can make the argument that the place for something like this is left open by the Kill la Kill canon, but you can't say it remotely resembles the creators' intentions.

If you found it hard to deal with, please tell me why. The opening that this provides to have Senketsu, Ragyo, and Nui return as characters is essential, as well as giving you an idea of the continued escalation of the series and why I have plans for it to go so long. But this sort of quasi-cosmic horror is tricky. It's nothing I have any experience with writing, that's for sure.

# The Down-Under Deception: Satsuki Breaks a Promise

March 2067

~~~~~

It didn't take long after Ryuko ran off on her own for Satsuki's stomach to drop. It was hardly the most pressing issue, certainly nobody around her noticed a single change in Satsuki's composure. Years ago she had mastered her own body such that she could beat down these sorts of stimuli in almost every case. She didn't clutch at her belly, she didn't go pale, she didn't even frown and get quiet like most people do when they're fighting their stomach. If anyone there had known her *extremely* well they'd see that very faint, indefinable tension which said something was up, but to everyone else she seemed as cool and collected as ever. Pain was just an alarm bell, and once you identified its source it was no longer relevant.

This was a pretty loud alarm bell though.

*I need to get someplace quiet and figure this out.* Was Satsuki's conclusion as to what this alarm bell meant. But there was no time for that! Her mind raced through every hypothetical for what might happen next.

*Calm down, don't panic. You'll make a mistake if you panic.* Moment's ago she'd felt on top of the world, racing towards an inevitable triumph. Now the best thing to do was try to feel nothing at all.

There was absolutely no room for doubting this was a trap, her intuition rebelled against any other possibility. And if they were willing to risk that, there were two options – either this was just a deliberate distraction to keep her out of the way or they had a weapon they were fairly confident would work. If it was the latter, there were two options from there – either they were right or they weren't. If they were, then they would capture her and no doubt have a method of getting her off the island before any retaliation was possible, and then – no! No good following that pathway where it lead. But if they were wrong and Ryuko got away then they it was the same as the distraction, meaning Ryuko was out of the picture for the foreseeable future.

Which meant that this party was about to become a bloodbath, the only question was if it would be covert assassination or outright firing squad. This reality was one Satsuki had to react to before she even started figure out what came after.

Everything was turned on its head. Ryuko was the one keeping tabs on most of the enemy agents, plus scanning the perimeter – without her, Satsuki was half blind. Well, more than half, Houka, Izanami, and Misaki could only rely on immobile security cameras. So she had no idea where her enemies were, no idea what might be a threat. Every open window was a line of sight for snipers, every guest leaving the room could be heading off to get their gun and their ultima uniform. Plus, Ryuko had been her weapon. Satsuki was intent on keeping the promise she'd made to herself – to never kill someone again – and Ryuko was more than capable of nonlethally disabling an ordinary person if she wanted, so Satsuki's plan was to stay near her and know she wasn't even killing by proxy. Now that was out the window. She'd need to find another way to defend herself.

But she couldn't do anything just yet. She was seated at one of the parlor tables in the main dance hall, listening and pretended to be politely interested as the Executive Minister's nephew, a completely empty-headed man, told a childhood anecdote about Liza that was meandering and didn't really have a point or even a punchline.

"Hey," Satsuki nearly jumped when Yuda walked up behind her chair and tapped it quietly, not interrupting the story.

Satsuki resisted the urge to whip around and get in his face. *You're so supposed to be a bodyguard and you let your charge wander off into danger, what's the point of you?* Instead, she nodded off to the side and he wandered off, and it looked to unobservant eyes like he'd just been checking up on her as was his duty. But she excused herself at the earliest convenient moment and found her way to a mirrored side alcove by the banquet tables, where the waitstaff were already getting ready for supper to be served. Even then Satsuki couldn't be sure she could trust, and she pretended like she was fixing her hair until Yuda got there.

"What's the next move?" He asked, smooth and businesslike.

"Well, she'll be of no service to us. You were right there, Uwais, you really couldn't have said anything?"

"Wha – I – forgive me Lady Satsuki but I didn't think I had the authority to tell Ryuko Matoi what to do."

Satsuki nodded curtly, feeling embarrassed with herself. He was right, of course. "Nevermind that. Have your men begin to tighten the noose, as quickly as possible. Take as many of them out as you can without making a scene or raising their alarm. Houka?"

~ "Ready and waiting" ~ Houka said over the earpiece hidden behind her earring.

"Begin soft lockdown protocol," She said. This meant begin to shut and all lock automatic doors, secure all exits to the palace, and begin a full sweep of rest of the island with the military forces that had smuggled themselves onto the island posing as hotel guests. All without tipping anyone off that something was up, which was the real trouble.

~ "On it. You heard her girls, get to work." ~ With Kamui directly wired into the internet, this was child's play for Houka. Honestly it would have been child's play for him since before he even came to Honnouji, just now he was doing a million other totally unrelated things at the same time. ~ "You should know, Ryuko has gone far enough down in the sublevels that she no longer has any internet service." ~

"Noted, please inform me if - when she returns."

~ "Of course," ~ Houka said gravely. He was in full business mode, it came with practiced ease to him just as it did Satsuki.

"What should I do, Satsuki?" Yuda asked as Houka's voice clicked off

*What would you do? I just hope you're good at killing people because that's all we'll need soon. Really does it matter where you are when the bloodbath starts?* "Keep an eye on things in the ballroom for me for a moment, check in on everyone and have them get ready."

“As you say,” Yuda nodded, “When should I expect you back?”

“Oh, not more than a few minutes. I just need to go to the restroom.”

~~~~~

It wasn't just any restroom that Satsuki was heading to, her target was quite far from the ballroom, in a wing of the palace that included the main library. It wasn't particularly big and fancy either, so there was no real reason for any guests to go there. Just an ordinary toilet, except for the false wall. Behind there, a secret room with blast proof walls and a safe door that wasn't on any map of the palace. It wasn't because Satsuki and Houka had installed it themselves; only they and Ryuko knew its location. This was her bolt hole, her quiet place to figure things out. And, if things went really wrong, where she would hide until it all blew over.

Of course she would never dream of using it that way. But it was comforting, just to know she had it.

Now that she had nothing else to do but walk and look preoccupied so nobody would bother you, Satsuki had time to begin fully processing the situation. It wasn't pretty.

*Stupid! Thoughtless, imbecile woman! You'd think she'd learn, but I guess no, why learn when you're Ryuko! She's ruined everything and now we're all in danger! **She's** in danger!*

*God, what will I do if she's not okay? What's even the point?*

The crowds were beginning to thin out as she hurried through the gilded halls. Guests had percolated throughout much of the gigantic, lavish complex – there must have been more than a thousand total. Satsuki's thoughts were finally starting to get the best of her; her mouth was drawn, her face pale.

*But I'm no better. I should have known, you don't plan **with** Ryuko you plan **for** what she's going to do! Easier to stop the sun from rising. I should have had someone down there already so she wouldn't even have the chance! Hell, I could have told her what the end goal was before today! She trusted me to take care of all the details, how didn't I plan for this situation?*

Satsuki crossed over from one wing of the palace into the other, through the library, through a few extra lounges occupied by people so tangentially related to the events of the day that they didn't really even react to her presence besides a polite nod and a feeling of relief that they were just minor pencil pushers and didn't have to deal with whatever was upsetting her so.

She was the hall where her restroom was, alone except for an older Australian woman smoking and talking on the phone by an open window. Relief filled her - nearly there. A minute in her safe room would be worth an hour outside. All she had to do was clear her mind, not think of what might be happening to Ryuko – absolutely not, not under any condition – and she'd know what to do.

But Satsuki's thoughts were cut dramatically short.

~~~~~**THE EYE**~~~~~

Vast, iridescent, smooth and glossy like stained glass, it filled the entire hall and bled out, merging with the walls, floor, ceiling in a thin line of burning white glow. The hall seemed to go underwater with all the blue light that radiated from it – not blinding but hypnotizing, beautifully complex. It was suddenly there where only thin air had been, just a few feet in front of Satsuki's nose. What else could she do but fall over backwards?

It was gone before she even hit the ground. No, it was gone before even that; Satsuki would have missed it if she'd blinked. It was there and gone like a thought, in less than a fraction of a second. And with it came – and went – an indescribable feeling. Like there was a needle right through her sternum, pumping adrenaline straight into her heart. Exactly that painful, but so electrifying that she only felt the pain once the initial rush was gone. She felt so hyper-aware, so coursing with energy that she could run straight up walls in heels. But only for the briefest instant.

“Aaah!” Satsuki couldn't help but gasp in surprise as she hit the ground, chest burning and hands clenching in hollow pain.

*Great, on top of everything I'm hallucinating. Have I been drugged?*

~ “Are you alright Satsuki?” ~ Houka asked urgently.

“Houka, what's the status of my food taster?”

~ “One moment... She's alive and well.” ~ Houka confirmed. Satsuki's mind was reeling. She honestly wished she'd just been drugged, because at least that would explain this.

*This is it, I'm finally cracking.* The sight of that tremendous eye was burned into her mind. There was no doubt, it had a gear shaped pupil – actually a vast pupil-within-a-pupil, a system of concentric rings with little interlocking spokes – and she knew that all too well. That was Ryuko's eye.

But then, if her mind was succumbing to insanity, why was the old woman shaking, staring where the eye had been, phone and cigarette on the ground? Why was there a perfect, razor thin scorch mark lining the hall right where it had been, a black ring burned into the walls, the molding, the rug?

“One moment, Houka,” She said as the realization sunk in.

*No, that was **real**.* It seemed unbelievable, but Satsuki had lots of experience with the unbelievable.

*That was **Ryuko**!*

*She's trying to warn me of something,* She didn't know why, but something deep in her jumped to that. Something truly strange was happening here today. That great eye reminded her of nothing more than the even larger one that had filled the sky when Ragyo activated Shinra-Koketsu. Only this time it wasn't an alien entity, it was Ryuko, she just knew it. Questions of how could wait. Again, without really needing to think the very instinct that had gotten Satsuki through the other monumental events of her life was working for her now.

*But what? I have no idea,* The instinct couldn't go *that* far. Satsuki had to decide on the most likely explanation. *I'm being followed.*

The old woman? No, her reaction to the eye was much too genuine – she seemed to be in shock. But she couldn't stay to tell anyone what she'd seen. Satsuki walked up to her, said, "Are you okay?"

"L-Lady Satsu-," Two fingers direct to the center of the throat. Satsuki was well versed in this technique, she could feel her windpipe compress, but not tear. And then she was out cold in Satsuki's arms.

Nobody else in the hall. She couldn't trust that though. Satsuki found a coat closet, dropped the unconscious woman, and then stepped out into the hallway as nonchalant as possible.

There was a woman coming. Satsuki recognized her from the list of suspected REVOCS agents. Australian, young with a square, smooth face, just slightly too wide at the hips to have a good figure but instead tough looking and stocky. Satsuki had no doubt she was quite strong and well-trained too - that's probably why this was her job. Not that it mattered, what mattered was the faint stiffness to her gait Satsuki identified as someone with a gun up their jacket.

This was it.

*Don't panic. You'll make a mistake if you panic.* The good news was her assassin wouldn't fire until she'd gotten to point blank range. She couldn't leave anything to chance. The bad news was there was no cover between the coat closet and the door to Satsuki's restroom.

Calm as could be, Satsuki walked on to the door. But internally she was beginning to sense that the calculus wasn't working out. The assassin was, what, twenty yards out? She would cover that before Satsuki could open the secret door, definitely before she could grab a needlegun. Satsuki opened the door, immediately despaired. There wasn't a single angle in the room where the line of sight to the door was blocked. Just a toilet, a sink, a towel rack. So she'd need to ambush her at the door, take her down in hand to hand combat. Could she do it? Normally Satsuki wouldn't question it, but in such a small room against a trained assassin who might be wearing an Ultima Uniform, in this dress? Without a doubt there was a second wave coming to make sure the job was done, and she wouldn't be able to treat a bullet wound in time even with the first-aid supplies inside her safe room. So she had to do something that would *guarantee* that she couldn't get off a shot. But if she was hiding an Ultima Uniform under that suit, she didn't have trick in her unarmed repertoire that could do that without getting behind her and pinning her. And in this tiny space even that looked unlikely!

Satsuki had her head close to the door, listening to the footsteps getting closer, when she realized just how dire the situation was.

*I've **been** panicking. I've been making mistakes. I cornered myself, I walked away from my allies, and for what? What good will time to think **really** do now?*

*I'm going to die. This is it. The great Satsuki Kiryuin, shot to death on the toilet.*

*Or that could not happen.* She still had one thing that would work. She still had her hardened life-fiber false toenails.



And she wasn't about to waste the chance Ryuko had given her. Promises be damned.

~~~~~

The door flung open. A silenced pistol in a clenched fist leapt through it. Hesitated just an instant too long.

“HiiiYA!” Satsuki didn't hesitate. She had nothing else but a single kick, one with sufficient force to tear through the four layers of her dress, smash her entire foot clean through the front of her shoe, breaking her big toe in the process. But that didn't matter, and Satsuki's foot, blue-black blade on her false toenail glinting, embedded itself in the assassin's temple. Satsuki could feel it the energy field of an Ultima Uniform shattering, like a magnetic repulsion suddenly disappearing, and then the skin ripping, and then finally the skull. And then the pain as the follow-through from the kick carried her would-be assassin's head into the door and the shock rocketed through her broken toe.

She was dead. The gun had never gone off. Satsuki wrenched her bloody foot free and reached down to take the limp body's pulse. It wasn't completely faded yet, but the assassin's eyes were glazed over and blood trickled freely over her face.

*Better safe than sorry.* Satsuki picked up the gun and mechanically painted the walls with her would-be assassin's brains. It was just good practice. Now there could be no doubt. The life-fibers in her Ultima Uniform started to glow, faint red light seeping out from the cuffs of her sleeves. No living creature, nothing to keep them tied there. She really was dead.

For the first time in three years, three overall good years, Satsuki had killed. She'd betrayed herself. Better safe than sorry indeed. She'd had a chance, however slim, to back down and try to save this poor woman. But instead she'd gone all the way without even thinking of it. No half measures.

And worst of all, she felt... nothing. Oh, why couldn't she have felt sick like she did the first time? All she felt was the dead certainty that the killing was only starting today.

*No half measures. I'll have time for remorse later. Once I see Ryuko again.*

Calm as ever, Satsuki deftly entered the combination for the safe room. A splint for her broken toe, two needle guns and plenty of ammo, smoke and flash grenades, a bulletproof vest over her torn dress, a hardened life-fiber knife. That was as good as it was going to get. Then, she heard more footsteps. Louder, faster – this was the second team, and by now they clearly knew something had gone wrong. On the way to the door Satsuki smashed a piece off the mirror, then leaned it on the door frame and angled it out into the hall. Sure enough, a man and a woman stalking down the hall at an intent pace. And behind them - a third? Who was that? Why was he running at such a headlong sprint.

“Uwais?”

The assassins of the second wave didn't have time for that realization. With a shout, Yuda Uwais crashed into the man with a flying elbow drop to his head, rolling over him and rounding on the woman. Suddenly a pair of karambit knives appeared from his sleeves, and Satsuki watch with appreciation as he worked her over from knees to neck, precisely opening and hitting each weak point. *So that's what he's here for*. First her clothes shredded, then – to Satsuki's surprise – the Ultima Uniform underneath shredded as the flurry of blows overwhelmed its modest energy field and then finally there was a karambit in her neck and, with a twist, she didn't have a neck anymore.

But the man on the ground wasn't out yet. Satsuki gasped as Yuda took a full clip to the chest and kept right on fighting, leaping onto him and taking him out with the same graceful flurry of slashes.

Yuda stood up, looking not at all relieved. At least, not until he saw Satsuki.

"My lady!" He smiled as he ran over to her. That faded when he saw the corpse of the assassin with half her face turned into an exit wound. Satsuki had not gotten through untroubled, and she looked *pissed*. The scowl he remembered from old news stories was back. "Forgive me, but I saw them tailing you. I just couldn't-"

"Well, you're here now, Uwais," Satsuki said. And now that he was closer, she could see why he'd survived getting shot through the holes in his suit, "And you're... wearing an Ultima Uniform." To illustrate what exactly she meant by this, she raised her knife and pointed it at his neck.

The look of panic on Yuda's normally confident face as he realized that he might be taken for a traitor was enough to confirm that he wasn't one, but still he shouted, "Wha-I-Please forgive me, Satsuki! I've worn it while serving under Nonon for months, I was just afraid you'd tell me I couldn't bring it and-," Satsuki held up a hand to stop him.

"For the record, I *don't* think the enemy would be stupid enough to send a double agent wearing an Ultima Uniform. And Nonon trusted you, and Ryuko too. You *have* made yourself look terribly suspicious, but truth be told I think you're just a fool," She lowered the knife, "Prove me wrong, and you know what happens."

She walked past him and could hear the air deflate from his lungs and a whispered string of Indonesian (what he said was "*Oh thank fucking God,*" but Satsuki didn't speak Indonesian). She called up Houka again, "Apologies for the interruption. It's starting. Full lockdown, eliminate all targets, *now.*"

"It's already started," Yuda blurted. He was right. Satsuki could hear faint noises. Gunshots, screams.

~ "*And we've already locked it down.*" ~ Houka added. ~ "*Nobody gets in or out until reinforcements get here.*" ~

"Understood. Thank you. And, er..."

~ "*Ryuko? No word.*" ~

Satsuki nodded, "Uwais, take what you need from the safe room. We're returning to the ballroom and regrouping with survivors on the way." She started down the hall, but Yuda didn't move, "What's wrong?"

"... It's nothing, My Lady."

"Well, you stopped me to say it, so you might as well."

Yuda sighed, "That safe room is for you, Satsuki. To be used in case the day is lost. Lady Satsuki, without Ryuko have we already lost?"

That was a thought she reserved for herself and herself alone. Her subordinates could not be allowed to even consider it, they didn't mean it in the right way.

“The only way to lose is to die. Are you dead yet, Uwais?”

~~~~

Chaos consumed the palace. Terrified nobles and bureaucrats ran screaming and ducked for cover while bullets and needles flew through every hall, mowing them down in the crossfire. Even though REVOCS had been the ones to strike first, Satsuki’s special forces were the best of the best, and even without her command they knew things had progressed to a new and deadly stage. So if REVOCS struck first it really was first by a nose and to poor innocents caught between them it just seemed that all of a sudden everyone was shooting everyone else. Blood and broken glass ran everywhere.

Even in the library, so far from the main event, battling factions were trading fire from opposite shelves. Occasionally an Ultima-Uniform wearing REVOCS soldier would use his enhanced speed to dart across the no-man’s land, but he’d be lucky to get a single kill before someone dropped a smoke grenade in his face and hosed him with automatic needle fire. Bullets against ordinary humans and needles against Ultima Uniforms meant the sides were much more even than they might initially appear. Such was the state of things when Satsuki and Yuda burst in.

“Anyone who wants to live, get behind me!” Yuda shouted, barreling through and soaking bullets as Satsuki followed right behind. This was the first time she’d used a needle gun in real combat but that hardly slowed her down. A flash grenade right in the center of the REVOCS position and they flushed them out, and from there it was easier than basic training. Terrified guest and only slightly less terrified agents emerged from their hiding spots and formed the beginning of a bereaved train that would follow them deeper into the chaos (well, some of the nobles ran in the opposite direction – a fair move all things considered)

And when a man from the front of the crowd suddenly pulled a knife and lunged for Satsuki’s back, she didn’t hesitate.

“Satsuki, look out!” Yuda shouted, but before he could get there Satsuki had dropped her needle gun and went for her pistol. Two shots, one to the torso, the next to the head.

She didn’t feel anything this time either. *This is exactly what I was afraid of.*

“Disgraceful,” She spat haughtily. *Why? Why did I say that? These are the thoughts I should be suppressing.*

But it was already too late. She would win the tried and true way. No half measures.

# The Down-Under Deception: Never Fight Alone

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March 2067

~~~~~

The palace intercom system blared to life with a sharp feedback noise, ~ *“Good afternoon. I’m to believe I have the pleasure of addressing one Satsuki Kiryuin,”* ~ The voice that came through was smooth, gloating, eager, ~ *“And the rest of the island, I suppose. You’ve put up a good fight so far, but you should realize by now that you’re surrounded.”*~

“Lady Satsuki, that’s Godfrey’s voice. They must’ve found him,” Yuda said softly, picking his way over the bodies. From behind a makeshift cover constructed from a bronze statue and a couch Satsuki nodded stiffly. Putting up a good fight was an apt description of what they were doing – holding out against waves of enemies by setting up impenetrable suppressing fire on every door with Yuda to take care of anyone who managed to get close, pushing up methodically room by room with smoke and flash grenades and everyone watching each other’s backs. It had been a long time since Satsuki had needed to practice such elementary ground-level tactics, but she hadn’t forgotten and her soldiers certainly hadn’t. Plenty of them were former Nudist Beach or Honoujji, close encounters with life-fibers were what they trained for. Yuda had quickly come to appreciate just how much more professional they were than the militias he was used to. When one of them went down or panicked it didn’t turn into a rout, but instead a bait for the enemy. For each of them that died, they made sure at least five REVOCS cultists fell in exchange.

But they were outnumbered, outgunned, and now this, ~ *“Of course, I know we are also surrounded. Military intervention on international neutral territory, how enlightened of you Satsuki. And a battleship too! I know you’re not compensating for anything but you could’ve fooled me,”* ~ It felt like he’d rehearsed this all in his head many times and was giddy to be actually saying it. ~ *“But that’s fine. Those of us who plan on surviving have our means of escape. I’m more interested in all the innocent people you brought here for your little spy-games. There must be, what, a couple hundred of them still alive? I know we have quite a few here in the ballroom with us . What’s gonna happen to them?”* ~

*Let me guess,* Satsuki thought. She had a pretty good idea where this was going.

~ *“I’ll tell you what’s going to happen to them. And I’ll make you an offer. Come to us in the main ballroom, come alone, come unarmed, and don’t try anything. And we’ll exchange your life for theirs.”* ~

Silence. Nobody was coming to attack. Suddenly all eyes were on Satsuki.

~ *“Now, I know once you would n’t trade your life even for an entire city. But you’ve changed, haven’t you? What’s one life compared to all these poor people, huh? Hell, we’ll even let your followers go free too. Walk out. No harm done. Every single person in this building can live, except you. Or, y’know, you can try to fight your way out. Maybe you can do it, I don’t know. But you’ll be the only one to leave this building alive if you try. Oh, and for the rest of you: Satsuki Kiryuin’s entire purpose behind this ball was to lure us out into the open. I’d say it’s going pretty well*

wouldn't you?" ~ He broke off with a strained chuckle, then cleared his throat and went on, ~ "You have have fifteen minutes, then the executions begin. You'd better hurry, I think there's someone you **really** wouldn't want to see dead. We'll start with her. Oh, and should you happen to meet with death on the way, well then we'll consider the trade done. Fifteen minutes. Alone. Unarmed. See you there." ~

Satsuki's stomach dropped. Someone she really wouldn't want to see dead? That couldn't be... no, it couldn't be Ryuko! Right? *No, that doesn't make any sense. If she really is their only chance to get Ragyo back they wouldn't dare threaten to kill her. Besides, they must want her even more than me. No, they're just referring to Liza, I'm sure of it.* Having sufficiently reassured herself, Satsuki stood up to reassure her troops.

"If they had Ryuko, we'd be dead already," She declared, "They know their time is limited, and they plan to do as much damage as possible before the noose closes. I will go stop them, but not alone. We've all faced worse before, these dishonorable terrorists don't compare."

There were no cheers, just satisfied nods and grunts; someone said, "We're with you, Lady Satsuki." That was all she needed.

They fought on. Resistance was minimal for the first minute or so, just a few patrolling squads who were easy to catch by surprise. Any of the cowering guests who might have thought about mobbing up to get her and save their skins quickly changed their minds seeing the crew of fearsome soldiers around her and – even more importantly – the imperious air with which she stalked the halls. She'd torn off the skirts of her gown altogether now leaving her legs bare, and had undone the restrictive corset so she fit better into a bulletproof vest, but the message was still clear. She wasn't the sort of person who got brought down by some desperate rabble.

But that smooth progress was brought down as she proceeded through a large, empty lounge. They'd almost made it to far side when -

"Satsuki Kiryuin!" A woman's voice, strident and deep. Without hesitation Satsuki turned and poured needles at the unfamiliar voice, only to watch in surprise as they bounced harmlessly off her.

"Get back!" Yuda shouted, throwing himself between Satsuki and the woman as she charged forward, slicing down two unfortunate soldiers with spastic, lightning swift swings of a straight-bladed longsword, "She's wearing a *Huskarl* model!"

Satsuki had never seen one this close before, but Yuda was certainly right. It had those distinctive plates of armor that unfurled like flower petals to project its energy field. She knew full well that even the Kamui found this type annoying to put down. And the woman operating it looked plenty tough too, a tall, imposing Valkyrie with blonde hair (buzzed short like all the really hardcore REVOCS cultists), shapely but defined musculature, and startling blue eyes that bored into Satsuki with fanatic rage. Just as she raised her sword to charge at Satsuki Yuda darted into the opening and slammed into her chest bodily. Satsuki saw as he grabbed her arm how he couldn't put his hands anywhere close to her skin, but that didn't stop him from wrapping both arms around one of hers and throwing her across the room.

"Go! I got this one!" Yuda shouted.

"Uwais, no! We stick together, especially against a two-star!"

"It'll take too long, you need to go!"

“But -”

Uwais looked back at Satsuki with a determined glint in his eyes, “I might be a fool, yeah, but I can still earn my keep. Let me.”

Satsuki only had to pause for a moment to decide, “Very well.” She extended her hardened life-fiber knife to him, “Good luck.”

“Don’t need it,” Yuda gently pushed the knife away, and from his sleeves his Karambits dropped into his palm, “These work just fine.”

Satsuki nodded. He must have learned a lot under Tsumugu and Aikuro to be so confident. She waved to pick out about half the other soldiers in the room, who’d been watching nervously as this dangerous foe got to her feet, “You, with me! The rest of you, remain here and cover Uwais!” With that, she sprinted out the door before the woman in the *Huskarl* Ultima Uniform could respond.

~~~~~

~ “*Two more coming from the door behind you!*” ~ Izanami helpfully chirped into Satsuki’s earpiece and, without even bothering to look, Satsuki turned one of her needle guns towards the hallway and sprayed it until she heard two groans and two thuds. Then she kept running.

Fifteen minutes. Not nearly long enough at her previous pace. She’d memorized the palace layout, but taking the most direct straight shot was impossible, the enemy clearly knew where she was and had dug in on the long hall way that ran through the middle of this wing of the palace with ambushes laid at every door. So instead here she was darting through back rooms, up and down flights of stairs, taking a circuitous route. And running the entire way.

“Lady Satsuki! There’s – GAAAGH!” One of her men trailing right behind her didn’t get a chance to shout his warning as the door next to him burst open and he fell to the ground, shredded by a claymore hidden right behind it. Right after the blast a REVOCS soldier leapt out to finish the job with his rifle, but Satsuki was there with her knife in his neck before he could get off a shot. The next one came at her with a sword – a fatal mistake, having an Ultima Uniform to enhance your speed didn’t make you any less predictable. He was dead before he even passed the door frame, and then Satsuki ducked out of the way as a retaliatory flurry of bullets soared through the door. She quickly tossed a flash grenade into the room, and the moment it had gone off leapt right after it, with the rest of her squad behind her quickly clearing the room. One last REVOCS soldier sprung out at the last second from the secret room where they’d been hiding, but it had an automatic door and the moment he stepped out Izanami slapped it in his face and locked it on him. And so it went.

Satsuki had been, by all appearances, surrounded and outgunned several times today she thought nothing of it the last time, the time she couldn’t get out of. By this point her squad had been whittled down to almost nothing, with only a few belts of needles too – they’d taken guns from fallen enemies too but against Ultima Uniforms that didn’t mean much. To make matters worse they were pinned in a wide atrium with the only unguarded stairwell down to first floor she’d found – unguarded at least until the enemy got wind they were there. And now there were soldiers firing down from the floor above them, soldiers waiting down below, and all they had was a foot of carved marble railing between them and the hail of bullets.

*If I should happen to meet with death on the way indeed*, Satsuki concluded morosely. But panic time was over, now Satsuki could only process everything that was happening around her like a chess game. The whine of the ricocheting bullets, the acrid smell of smoke and explosives, the little

chips of marble that were pattering off her face, the endless drone of the guns and shouting, none of that meant anything to her. This time, the move was to either kill or drive off the enemies on the third floor, reposition up there and deal with survivors in close quarters, then move on to the ones down below - maybe they would try to move up the stairs and if they had a chance to shoot them while they were still climbing the stairs that would be great.

So Satsuki did have a plan, and one that she was quite confident would get them through this room. What would happen in the next room, who knew, but in the moment working the current problem was all that mattered. So really it wasn't that Satsuki couldn't get out, just that she didn't get a chance to try.

~ *"Satsuki! Something incredibly fast is moving through the first floor, coming right towards you!"*  
~

"What? Houka speak up!" A new noise, one Satsuki hadn't really noticed, had entered the mix. A roaring, crashing noise of lots of wood and masonry splintering. It was getting louder

~ *"There's something coming and I don't know what – nevermind, brace for impact!"* ~

Satsuki reflexively obeyed, but nobody else did, and she watched as her last two agents were flung halfway across the room as the wall collapsed into a cloud of masonry and dust. Then, blinding red-orange light filled the room, and the only sound that filled what felt like silence were the clatter of guns falling to the ground and panicked, muffled screams.

Only now that Satsuki's combat rhythm had been broken did she fully process what Houka had said, what it meant, how it related to this red light. There could only be one possible explanation.

Reflexively Satsuki flung a hand over her mouth – terrified at how it was smiling all on its own. She didn't realize how scared she was, scared because how could she expect herself to believe now after this disaster of a day that suddenly everything was okay? She wanted so badly to believe, but if somehow she was wrong she couldn't stand the despair. What could she do but sit there, trying to control her breathing, waiting to see if she she could hope again?

"Sats?"

~~~~~

"And who the hell are you supposed to be?" The woman in the *Huskarl* said to Yuda as he squared off in the doorway Satsuki had just fled through.

"I'd tell you, but I doubt we'll know each other long enough for it to matter!" Yuda retorted, lunging in and dodging around her as she swiped her sword. As Yuda had suspected, in a two-star she was stronger and faster than him, but he knew it took more than strength to win a fight. Sliding in past her, Yuda simply held out a leg to trip her, and though she avoided falling her momentum kept her stumbling past him.

"Step aside! I have come for Satsuki Kiryuin, nobodies like you needn't defend her. Simply allow me to pursue her and you shall live."

"Is that so? Well, what do you think of this?" Yuda ripped off his suit jacket (or what remained of it) to reveal the one-star Ultima Uniform he was wearing underneath. The wires on the form fitting

leotard glowed purple-red along the definition of his muscles. The woman's eyes were wide with shock and rage.

"You..."

"That's right! I took this from one of your stupid buddies! Just 'cuz you're powered up doesn't mean you get to ignore the basics of combat, you know that right?"

"Y-you lie!"

"You wish."

Her face hardened, "Then I shall strip it off you and avenge him." Exactly what Yuda wanted. Couldn't have her actually running past him to Satsuki.

"So you say," Yuda nodded as she lunged at him. Fortunately, her sword was steel, not hardened life-fibers, but even so his energy field would drop long before hers if he sustained a direct hit. So he skirted around her, staying close and trying to get behind her at every possible opportunity. As she barreled through furniture he vaulted over it, blocking her strikes with his karambits but never counterattacking. There was no point, he knew full well that against a *Huskarl* fast moving attacks wouldn't do anything but slow moving objects could pass through. With that extra defense and her greater strength his opponent all but loomed over him, but fortunately that didn't make her any heavier than she naturally was. Whenever he got the chance, Yuda tripped her or grabbed and threw her, putting his martial arts training to best use.

And Tsumugu had taught him the art of fighting life-fibers well. Against an opponent with greater speed you had to be conservative with your motions – don't give them any openings, don't over extend yourself. Against an opponent with greater strength you had to block their attacks indirectly, glancing your blade off theirs or catching it at an angle so the force of the strike couldn't overwhelm you. These were the most basic principles, but in skilled hands they meant that even if Yuda would have to wear her down in a battle of endurance, he sure wasn't losing to her.

"So, am I gonna get your name? Or are we just two nobody minions filling in for our betters?" Yuda taunted as they fought.

"The nerve! Surely you've heard of the great Order of the Couturières!" She shouted back, slicing a lamp in half and forcing one of Yuda's soldiers who'd stayed back to dodge as it whizzed past him.

"Uhhh... nope, can't say I have!"

"The Order of the Couturières is one of the most respected in all of REVOCS, founded by our patron, the goddess Nui Harime!"

"So she's a goddess too now, huh?" Yuda muttered to himself. Finding himself with his back to the wall – or more accurately to a bookcase - he leapt up and sunk one of his karambits into the top shelf.

"We trim the world into the shape desired by the Goddesses! As second prefect of the Couturières Australis chapter I will not tolerate such demeaning from a worthless commoner such as yourself! - Agh!" She leapt up after him, but the moment he did he kicked off, pulling the entire bookcase down on top of her.



Of course, she pushed it off like it was nothing, but it still felt good, “Is that so? Well, let me go a little further! You might be good with that sword, but you’re shit against other life-fibers.”

“YOU DARE!” Furious, she rushed him with sword held high, blurring across the room and tearing the rug with every driving step.

“I, on the other hand, have studied with the masters! And they taught me two lessons you need to learn. One. Make sure your hilt isn’t too long.”

“Huh?” Just as her sword fell, Yuda snagged it with a scissoring of both his karambits, locking them both there. Seeing that both his hands were busy, the Couturière removed her left hand from the hit to punch him. Her bottom hand. Now the energy field from her *Huskarl* wouldn’t reach down to the sword’s pommel.

“Mistake. Pop!” Yuda’s knee shot up and hit the pommel with all his might. The sword shot out of the Couturière’s hands like a rocket, embedding itself in the ceiling up to the crossguard.

“What!” She leapt up into the air to grab it back. But the moment she did two of Yuda’s men she hadn’t noticed creeping up behind her leapt right after her. Just because she was stronger didn’t mean she was any heavier, and with her in midair she had nothing to brace against as two fully grown men football tackled her in the back. Sure, she managed to grab one of their arms and crush it, splintering the bone in a fountain of blood, but her momentum couldn’t be stopped. And there was Yuda, laying on the ground, holding a Karambit out at the perfect angle.

Totally motionless. Her eyes went wide as she sunk in deep until even Yuda’s fingers were in her chest, and blood trickled out from between her ribs and from her mouth.

“Two. Don’t fight alone.”

“You... cheat...” She gasped, before Yuda wreched his hooked blade into her heart and felt her go limp on top of him and the energy field fade.

Just another body now. He pushed her off and got his feet, brushing himself off.

“Good work guys,” He said as the rest of his soldiers crowded around. He leapt up to pull the sword from the ceiling, admiring the detailed etching on the blade and the ornate crossguard, “One of you should take this. Makes a hell of a trophy.”

They both looked at each other and held up their hands (the non-broken ones, of course), and though Yuda could tell they were trying to be polite but both wanted it.

“You should have it,” One finally said.

“Nah, I’ve got these,” Yuda twirled his Karambits.

“Alright, alright. You take it.”

“Are you sure?” The other soldier said.

“Yeah. Getting out of her alive will be a trophy.”

As Yuda passed over the sword, its recipient asked, “What did you say your name was again, anyway?”

“Uwais. Yuda Uwais. What’s yours, friend?”

“Itsuki.”

~~~~~

“Sats?”

Satsuki’s heart felt like it would burst from her chest. She didn’t know whether to laugh, shout or cry. She couldn’t do any of those things. She was frozen.

“R...Ryuko?” She finally managed, softly, and then slightly louder, “Ryuko?”

Finally she couldn’t resist anymore. Popping her head above the marble wall, she looked down to ground floor. She didn’t know how to process what she saw.

The red light filling the room was dazzling, a complex mixture of shafts of different shades refracting through the falling dust. But in the center was a figure that Satsuki could never mistake. It was her.

The REVOCS soldiers were floating before her, suspended by pulsating orange webbing. Satsuki could see it glowing, emanating from the tip of Ryuko’s outstretched index finger in straight lines like laser lights to each of, then wrapping around them and melding with their Ultima Uniforms. Some kind of indescribable feeling between amazement and horror crept over her, it reminded her of nothing more than Ragyo’s mind-stitching technique, just used to ensnare the body instead of the brain.

But as soon as Satsuki stuck her head up, Ryuko’s eyes locked with hers, and that feeling was replaced with shock, sadness, sympathy. She saw in those unforgettable sapphire eyes frantic deadness, the type of scars she had seen all too often in lesser people, the thousand yard stare of someone who’d seen things that had been seared into their head. And Satsuki knew that her suspicions had been confirmed. Something horrible had been done to her.

Little did she know that inside, Ryuko felt great. What she’d seen in the larger universe held no fear for her now that she knew Satsuki was still among the living. It was all the death and bodies she’d seen since returning to Earth. Knowing what would happen to all those poor souls. She had no idea how crazed she looked to an observer, hadn’t thought at all about what Satsuki would think when she saw her. Until this moment.

“Y-you can come out,” Ryuko finally said, “I promise I got them all.”

Satsuki stood up and her two surviving soldiers, a man with a bullet wound in his thigh and a woman who was miraculously unharmed except a concussion which wouldn’t become apparent for a few hours, helped each other to stand too. They watched with open-mouthed awe as the webs of life-fibers, the webs of Ryuko’s own living body, that surrounded the REVOCS soldiers drank in their uniforms and grew into cocoons that left only their noses free to breathe.

“I don’t – I didn’t mean to scare you,” Ryuko blurted, and for some reason that was what forced her to decide how to respond. Didn’t mean to scare her indeed! This whole disaster was her fault! Satsuki had broken her promise to never kill because of her! How asinine was she?

For the sake of all the people who died today, Satsuki needed to be angry. She had a moral obligation to! But her heart wasn't in it. Because that asinine, blithe remark was all Satsuki needed to know this was real, not a hallucination or an impersonation. In one moment, the worst of all possibilities – that Ryuko might be on the way to becoming a puppet for Ragyo – had been removed. The world was saved. She was saved.

Compared to that, nothing else mattered.

"I know you didn't," Satsuki said, trying so hard to keep her voice level, keep it from breaking.

"Yeah but this grabbing move, I mean, it looks a lot like something Ragyo used to do, and I've never shown it to you before, and I thought you might think I was -"

Despite herself, that made Satsuki smile, "Ryuko, you thought *that* was what scared me?" She started walking down the stairs to Ryuko.

"Well yeah. I mean, you might have thought I really had been turned into Ragyo and so I shouldn't do anything that could make you susp – oh. *Ohhhh no* . Sats I'm so sorry I -"

"Just come here, you moron." Satsuki held her arms out, and Ryuko rushed into them at inhuman speeds. Oh, she felt so good. So warm. The light of Ryuko's hair was like a sun burrowing itself into Satsuki's chest. Satsuki was overwhelmed by the magic of being loved by such a being. She could never be worthy of something so sublime, but yet Ryuko loved her nonetheless. Loved her with that human heart buried at the core of all the light and power.

"Heh, I deserve that. Sats, I'm so sorry! I-I woulda told you I was okay but my phone broke when I busted through a wall! I'll never disobey you again! I'll never leave your side again I'll never question you again I'll never ever put you in danger again I swear I'll -,"

Satsuki wasn't even listening as Ryuko babbled. She knew exactly what she was trying to say. With the iconic Satsuki Kiryuin confidence – something she'd never been able to muster for this act before – Satsuki lifted Ryuko's chin to hers and kissed her. Ryuko embraced it without hesitation, making a surprised, happy little moaning noise. All the panic and the scars were gone from her eyes. Neither of them could remember the last time they'd been so happy.

So of course this was the moment when Yuda would show up, striding through the hole he made looking urgent but flush with victory, "Lady Satsuki! I followed the trail of bodies and I – *Whoaaaaaaa!*"

Ryuko immediately recoiled with her face as red as the glow in her hair, "Shit!" Satsuki just smiled.

"You will not speak of this for the rest of your lives. Not to each other or anyone else."

"Uhhhhh..."

"Yuda Uwais! Do you understand!" Yuda's mind was absolutely boggled, but on another level he instantly understood. Yes, there absolutely was a sort of symmetry to all this. He couldn't wait to hear Ryuko's explanation later. But what really mattered was that Ryuko was back. That meant they had won, and he was beyond elated.

"Yes Lady Satsuki!" He belted, and the others followed suit.

“Good. Now please, guard the doors while I speak to Ryuko.”

Once they were far enough away, Satsuki asked the burning question, “Ryuko what happened to you?” In response, to her dismay, the thousand yard stare came back into Ryuko’s eyes and she seemed look past her, a small frown on her face.

“Ryuko? A-are you alright? Snap out of it!”

“If I tried to explain,” Ryuko sighed, “You wouldn’t understand. And it would take forever.”

That’s right. Put aside such questions from later. Even if everything was alright now, they still had a time limit, “You’re right, we don’t have forever. We should just get out of here, for now.”

“You’re seriously going to the ballroom, huh?”

“There’s nothing else to do. This day’s been a disaster, but it’s the only way to keep more people from being killed. I don’t plan on dying, but I have to face them.”

“No.”

*Nothing that threatens a human will ever trouble you again.*

“Hmm?”

“It doesn’t have to be a disaster. You don’t have to face them. I can get you everything you hoped for and more.”

“They asked for me specifically. One way or another I have to face them.”

“That’s not true. Sats, you don’t have to do everything yourself. Just let me take care of this one. Something like this can’t possibly trouble me now.”

Ryuko looked beyond certain. It was a trifle. Like asking her to open a can.

“Okay. What’s your plan?”

## Chapter End Notes

Oop! It's a little late!

One more chapter in this little plot arc.

# The Down-Under Deception: An Abnormal Life

March 2067

~~~~~

Satsuki had expected Ryuko's plan to be as simple as bursting into the ballroom and brutalizing Lord Godfrey and everyone else before they could react, but that wasn't it at all. Turns out when she meant that she could get everything Satsuki wanted she did mean everything. Not just getting out alive, not just killing or capturing all the REVOCS soldiers, not just preventing any more innocents from dying, not even the goal Satsuki had laid out for her earlier. She really meant *everything*. It was the type of plan Ryuko usually didn't go in for because it involved knowing what people who weren't in on the plan would do, but she had a hunch. And so Satsuki found herself in the last place she expected – standing alone right in the middle of the main door to the ballroom, only now her confidence wasn't at all feigned.

The scene wasn't good. Satsuki's agents had lost the battle here, they'd simply been outnumbered. Any of them who hadn't retreated were lying dead or dying, along with plenty of guests, amidst shredded furniture and food and cocktails dribbling between the floor tiles. The smell of blood and death was thick in the air. It seemed like the last place you'd want to kick back and enjoy a banquet, but yet that's what the REVOCS leaders were doing.

In the center of the dance floor they'd dragged the largest table they could and all the softest, most plush couches, and there they sat still glowing with their Ultima Uniforms, hunched over and picking from a messy pile of food and alcohol piled high. Meanwhile around the rest of the room the great multitudes of guests lay or knelt on the floor in dense little groups, watched over by the rank and file soldiers. The men around the table were not blank-faced, shaven-headed zealots like them, nor were they the bloated men of wealth REVOCS courted with sex and forbidden pleasures in exchange for their money and influence. Satsuki knew their type well, if anything they were the true zealots, the true adherents of Ragyo's philosophy. Utter disdain for everyone and everything else, except their own excellence – *especially* when it came to their appetites.

*This must have been what the ancient vikings were like*, was Satsuki's detached takeaway.

In fact, they were so gleefully absorbed in their debauchery that Satsuki deduced Ryuko must have done something to make them think they'd captured her. Even they would be a little more disciplined if they didn't think they'd already won.

Lord Godfrey presided over them from the head of the table, hulking in his three-star Ultima Uniform. Like the first model of Uzu's Blade Regalia, the armor was so thick it was practically a small mech (although he'd removed his helmet), complete with the same proportionally diminutive legs. Although instead of shinai he instead had wrist mounted cannons, much less elegant. Presently a naked girl with downcast, hollow eyes was refilling his wine glass.

It was Liza, Satsuki's would-be betrothed. Her makeup was smeared across her face, a thin trail of blood dried to her scalp, and there were deep purple bruises around her neck. Satsuki knew just looking at her face that those wounds were only the beginning of how she'd been abused, along with the other naked women who'd been forced to wait on his entourage.

A lesser woman would have been brought to her knees by such overpowering rage and guilt. How dare he. In front of her own father, how *dare* he!

“Well, this is just appalling,” Satsuki said, and suddenly all eyes were on her. Some in shock and anger, others with rekindled hope, but either way Ryuko’s prediction that they wouldn’t shoot her dead the moment they saw her held out. Why spoil the fun when there was gloating to be done?

“Lady Satsuki!” Liza breathed, hardly believing her eyes. For that she got a mighty slap from Godfrey that sent her tumbling to the hard ground.

“Quiet you,” He said, then leered at Satsuki with a drunken smile, “So good of you to join us. I was beginning to think you wouldn’t show, with all the mess you’ve been making in the halls.”

“Hardly. I had to make sure you kept to your word. Liza, they haven’t killed anyone here since they threatened me, have they?” Liza looked to her, then Godfrey, and wisely decided to answer by shaking her head no. Was Satsuki really thinking about sacrificing herself for them? The idea terrified her and certainly a majority of the guests held prisoner there. Satsuki was a hero, a legend! She couldn’t die like this! Better they lay down their lives instead.

“What, you really suspect us of that? Come now, we are men of honor.” *I can’t think of anything you’re further from*, Satsuki thought.

“Good. Then I trust that I will not be gunned down with no warning now?”

Godfrey chuckled, “What, are you planning to challenge me to a death duel for their freedom? Not happening.”

“No, I thought not. Why would you, after all, when I’d win?”

That stopped Godfrey short. He stood up, “Would you now? Even with the power of the life-fibers on my side?”

“Of course,” The derision in Satsuki’s voice was more than obvious, and it clearly infuriated Godfrey, and by extent all the other REVOCS soldiers. They wanted to see her crying and pleading, dammit!

“You nearly got me there, you did!” With a tremendous force of will Godfrey made himself laugh, “You’re a real stone-cold fucking bitch, you know that! There are more important things to do than fight you, no matter that you’d lose. You’d lose.”

“No I wouldn’t.”

“Rrrgh! You’re stalling!” He pointed accusingly at her, so she could see right into the dark interior of the barrel of his wrist-cannon.

“Am I? Stalling for what? Do I look afraid to you?”

“Then die!” He shouted, and finally seemed ready to fire.

“One question!” Satsuki shouted so imperiously that he flinched, just a bit. “What exactly do you plan to achieve? The primordial life-fiber has been destroyed and the star-seed cocoon cannot be formed, so why go on?”

“... If you aren’t stalling, why bother asking? What good will it do you to know now that you’re going to die?”

“Perhaps I don’t believe death is the end,” Satsuki answered simply.

“Well too bad for you, it is! *Because* of you!” The rage boiled over and Godfrey slammed an armored fist on the table, “ We would all be in *paradise* right now, if it weren’t for you and Mato! Now there’s nothing – nothing at all – awaiting all of us. We’re going to go extinct, and all that will be left to show we ever existed will be ruins! And until then we’re stuck suffering here on this earth! And all because some people like you are too small minded, too afraid of the unknown! What else is there but revenge for us now?”

“Well, it certainly seems to me that you’re doing more than suffering,” Satsuki tilted her head mockingly to the banquet laid out for them.

“THAT’S IT! Any last words, Satsuki Kiryuin?” The cannon was back pointed at her, and she could see a light begin to glow deep within it.

“Yes, in fact. You were right before. I have been stalling,” The moment she said it, a hardened life-fiber knife plunged deep into Godfrey’s calf.

With everyone’s eyes so focused on Satsuki, nobody had even seen Yuda creep in, quiet as a mouse, until it was too late. The armor on Godfrey’s neck was too deep, but those disproportionately small legs were perfect. The noise of the bones Ryuko had fractured earlier snapping all the way was audible across the room.

“Regards from Lady Nonon,” He grinned as the pain shot through Godfrey.

“GYAAHAHAGH!” Godfrey rounded on Yuda as he shouted, blasting him twice with those bulky wrist cannons. Yuda went sailing back across the room, slamming into the wall and collapsing it on top of him in a cloud of dust. But even though the rest of the REVOCS soldiers opened fire on her that was all the time Satsuki needed to lunge to the edge of the doorway, grab the pistol she’d dropped there, and line up a perfect gut shot on her target. And this was no ordinary gun either, but the same starching round pistol that Ryuko had taken from the men who’d been waiting to trap her, the starching round pistol they’d never even gotten a chance to fire at her.

The shot was perfect, so perfect in fact that what happened next went down like clockwork.

“My Lord! Get down-!” Another REVOCS soldier, not even one of Godfrey’s entourage sharing the banquet but one of the rank-and-file, leapt in between at just the right moment and caught the bullet on his shoulder, going down without even a shout. His Ultima Uniform exploded off him and he writhed on the ground. The gunfire at Satsuki’s position continued, but she was well concealed behind the wall.

Godfrey held an arm up to order a halt to the shooting. “SATSUKI! THIS WASN’T PART OF OUR DEAL!” He roared. He motioned to his soldiers when he tried to shift his leg but failed, “The girl, now!”

When they brought him Liza he pressed a cannon barrel directly to the side of her trembling head, caressing her lovingly, “You know what happens next! Her blood is on your hands!”

“NO! Please!” It was the executive minister, calling out from the cluster of prisoners where he’d been shoved, tears rolling down his fat cheeks, “Don’t shoot!”

Godfrey took a moment to consider, “Satsuki sealed her fate, old man. Nothin’ personal.”

“Please! I’ll do anything! I-I’ll let you build your machines unopposed! I’ll let you keep siphoning money from the treasury!”

Beautiful. Satsuki shouted, “You *knew* they were doing that?” Shocked gasps filled the room from those Australians who were among the innocent bystanders. Respect for their leader had just about instantly bottomed out.

“Papa!” Liza sounded scandalized. After everything these people had put her through – Godfrey had been practically part of the family – and now she found out her father *knew* he was a traitor? He *knew* Godfrey was a monster capable of... this?”

“Sweetheart I’m... so sorry,” The old minister blubbered, then went right back to bargaining, “Anything, anything you want!”

“I want Satsuki dead.”

“Kill her. Kill her, please! I’ll- I’ll let you walk out of here a free man!”

“Papa!”

“She’s dying either way.”

“T-then I’ll resign! Yes, I’ll resign, and appoint you Executive Minister! You can even have Liza’s hand – t-to make it official!”

“No! No no no no!” Liza’s eyes went wild with panic and Satsuki felt an overwhelming pang of guilt. Godfrey was right about one thing, everything that happened today was on her hands. All the death, what Liza had endured, even this pathetic scene the guests-turned-prisoner were now forced to witness. At least it would be over soon.

Godfrey smirked, running a hand possessively over Liza’s chest, “She’s just a piece of meat to me. Another useless human body with no *vision*. But the Ministry... I’ll tell you what. Everyone in this palace except her dies, you write up pardons for me and everyone else in REVOCS and put us in control of the government before we kill you, and then we walk out unharmed. And she lives. Deal?”

It was, no doubt about it, the hardest decision poor Executive Minister Standhardt had ever made. He was just a general who’d been picked as the most inoffensive option to head the country way back when the moribund democracy collapsed into permanent military rule, he’d never expected them to bring his family into it! His face was so red it was almost the shade of Liza’s bruises. But in the end there was only one choice. “Deal.”

Godfrey’s face broke into a wide, murderous grin, “Hahaha. Hahahahaha! Oh, you see Satsuki, what a little overwhelming force can do? You used to be so good at that, guess you’ve lost your edge! Hahahaha... alright boys, go flush her out. Let’s wrap this up.”



“You really are the lowest of the low,” A voice, for a moment it could’ve been mistaken for Satsuki’s. But it wasn’t right, there was too much of a growling edge to it – where was it coming from?

“Who said that? Show yourself!”

“You think you know what overwhelming force is? I’ll show you what it really means.”

There was a tremendous rush of splintering noise and a vast, tugging tremor through the walls and floor, the momentary warning before the entire ceiling – and the roof and floors above – cracked and was torn away like a tinfoil in a tornado. It froze in the air, casting kaleidoscopic shadows as blinding red light blotted out the sky.

~~~~~

Ryuko felt *huge*. Bloated, even. Now that she was aware of it she felt as though her entire, continent spanning body was crammed down into this little bag of skin, squeezed into the squishy crevices between sinew and organs. Like she could explode apart at any moment, and while this pressure wasn’t painful or even really uncomfortable she knew releasing it would feel amazing. It was a feeling which would never truly go away ever again, but she felt it most acutely then.

It was like she could burst at any moment, but at the same time her heart was racing. Not too different from the sheer exhilaration, the raw power she’d felt during her final duel with Ragyo when Senketsu had grown to his Kisaragi form. And all she had to do was relax a little bit, give herself a tiny point along the skin where the binding could loosing ever so slightly, and part of her true self could escape.

It was her time. She’d been listening from the floor above, ear pressed to the ground.

“... alright boys, go flush her out. Let’s wrap this up.”

She loosened her grip on the tips of her fingers. Reach out. Threads shot out in every direction, just little probing tendrils exploring the open air. But they had force enough to start buckling the walls in around her the moment she latched on

“You really are the lowest of the low.”

“Who said that? Show yourself!” She heard quite clearly through the floor. Everything had worked exactly how she’d foreseen, somehow. She’d be laughing in shock if she didn’t have a part to play.

“You think you know what overwhelming force is? I’ll show you what it really means.”

One giant pull inward, and then just as quickly back out, and everything around her shattered. Her light glowed brighter than ever, brighter than she even knew as her face was encircled in that glow. Everyone shielded their eyes - it was impossible to look directly upon her majesty. Everyone, that was except Satsuki.

It was a striking scene worth the paintings of it that would be commissioned in later years. The humans huddled below, REVOCS with their decadent leaders in utter shock and the innocent with looks of rapturous joy, surrounded by the rubble of their festivities. Above them, Ryuko, tearing apart their insignificant construction with all its gilded leaf and marble columns in a mere flick of her wrist, face serene, brows shadowed with righteous fury. Yuda pulling himself free of the rubble

off the the side. And Satsuki standing framed in the doorway, also in awe, although hers was a more tender, personal kind.

The REVOCS soldiers cowering in fear. Years of idolization of Ragyo had conditioned them to feel a powerful mixture of adoration and terror at seeing an inhumanly beautiful woman bathed in light – the true power in the world that all lives must submit to, but also mercurial and dangerous. And now it was the enemy? With their protector dead, it was as though a world of great, evil powers was breaking through. How could they now believe that right would prevail on seeing this black-clad monster wreathed in flames floating above them? They felt the deep, instinctive fear their most distant ancestors reserved for wolves in the night. They trembled, frozen between the urge to run and the certainty that they wouldn't get far

For everyone else, the feeling might have been about the exact opposite. For years they'd seen Ragyo on TV and online, heard that there existed people with unnatural powers in the unattainable clouds of the very highest reaches of society. Some in this room had even had the privilege of getting to glimpse her from time to time. But that was nothing compared to this. How could they witness her and not rejoice?

Ryuko might've been able to do a great many things, but hover of her own power was still not one of them. She was merely suspended like a trapeze acrobat between her threads, so she let them go and dropped down the table below, adding a little extra force right at the end to crack it in half and send the legs clattering across the floor. She perched on the upward tilted edge of on, staring right at Godfrey with a predatory grin.

Another frozen moment. Nobody dared move and the only sound was the tumbling rubble. Just for added effect, and because she wanted to see how far she could push this thing, Ryuko relaxed her grip on herself just a little bit more, gave it a little loose point on her back right between her shoulders.

Audible gasps. Spreading out behind her back was three vast pairs of diaphanous wings. Razor thin and composed of a dazzling array of tiny interwoven red-orange strands, tapering off into points and meeting together just a few centimeters above her back with all the grace and elegance of a butterfly. Yes, this was exactly like Senketsu Kisaragi.

*To think I could have done this all along! Actually I think all the Kamui could have done this all along, if only they'd seen what I have seen,* Ryuko thought. But she couldn't be impressed with herself now, not yet.

"You know, I make it a rule never to fight someone who can't fight back. Fortunately for me though, this isn't a fight," She said smugly to Godfrey, and that broke the spell. Most of the REVOCS soldiers sprang to run, or desperately aimed their gun at the nearest guest, or her. But she was faster, and just as before released some threads from her finger, still with that crooked smile that made her canine teeth stick out just far enough to insinuate primal, murderous intent. Latching onto Ultima Uniforms, absorbing them, it was even easier than grabbing walls and floors, and as soon as she'd lifted her finger they were all wrapped tight and hung from wherever enough wall had survived, cocooned like flies in a spiderweb. She left Godfrey though, she wasn't done with him yet.

"It's a beatdown."

He toppled over, scurrying backwards on all fours with blood still trailing from the wound in his leg, frantically sobbing, "No. No no no no!" If Ryuko hadn't wrapped up the mouths of the other

REVOCS soldiers they no doubt would have been doing the same, but it was clear Ryuko had singled him out. She hadn't missed Liza's bruises, and as Ryuko stepped off the table after him she spared the unfortunate heiress a sympathetic glance, which this close up really was a heavenly smile. There were tears running down Liza's face, and how much of that was from staring at this bright light who could say?

"No! Y-you can't! Y-you – how? How!" He'd been told she was stupid and headstrong! He'd seen her fall for his ruse, hadn't he? He'd even gotten the secret signal that she'd been captured! If she'd been lying in wait right above him, that meant... this entire thing was *her* plan! Godfrey realized far too late that Satsuki wasn't the one he should have been afraid of.

"Come on, get up," Ryuko waved impatiently, "I saw you stand before, you can do it." Paralyzed with fear, Godfrey didn't move, so Ryuko lifted him effortlessly by the chin.

"Just to be clear, you're all going away for a *long* time for this, one way or another. The plan was to have an international tribunal, but I'm not really about that. See, judges can be bought. Prisons can be broken out of. You could get one of those minimum security joints. *You tried to kill Satsuki.* That's not good enough. And then I thought, well, why should I be beholden to something so temporary as some laws, just words in a dusty old book?" Ryuko had to laugh at the notion.

She went on, "What I am isn't something that laws or nations can touch. All these artificial things you make up to divide yourselves, I see past them. And that is why I will judge you myself."

To Satsuki this was, quite simply, amazing. Scary, definitely, even though she was mostly sure Ryuko was putting on an act. She was so different, so articulate, if there weren't luminous wings growing from her back Satsuki would even say arrogant. It made sense, Satsuki had often thought that for an immortal, powerful person the petty affairs of human law would be pretty meaningless, but if Satsuki didn't know any better should could never imagine Ryuko admitting it – she hated thinking of herself as anything but a human. Whatever had happened to her it had laid some essential truth bare, that much Satsuki realized without even thinking of it.

Because mostly she was thinking, *She's doing this for me. So I don't have to.*

"You got anything to say in your defense?" Ryuko growled.

"You're... the anaethema," Godfrey croaked.

"The what?"

"The... devil."

Ryuko chuckled. Was that supposed to be an insult? "Yeah, that's right. I'm your worst fuckin' nightmare. And you wanna know what I did to your goddess? I *devoured* her. Because that's what we do. We absorb each other to get stronger." As she spoke, his Ultima Uniform glowed where it touched her hand, rippling as one by one life-fibers popped off it and stuck themselves into her hand, slipping through the skin and inside her while she bored into his horrified eyes the whole time, still smiling. Within seconds his entire uniform was consumed and Ryuko was holding a naked man with a knife in his calf. "Enough of this. We got hurt people here and we all want to go home. You're guilty. RAAAA!"

With a noise like a meat-filled balloon popping Godfrey's body snapped, pummeled by fists moving faster than the human eye could see. He struck the ground, a bloody mess of limbs bending

the wrong way and deep fist shaped craters in his side. Every bone in his body was broken - except his spine, she wanted him to *feel* it. The noise that escaped his lips was a feeble, rasping croak.

“Oh, don't be such a baby. You'll live. Trust me, it's infinitely preferable this way,” Ryuko said. Nobody exactly rushed to help Godfrey, but Ryuko was right – she'd avoided anything vital, he would live on in agony, not able to ever fully heal nor die from his wounds. “As for the rest of you...” As one, the bindings around the other REVOCS tightened with muffled crunches and equally muffled screams – to each one she distributed a couple broken bones.

“Ahh. Alright, I think that's plenty. I'd go through what exactly each of your crimes was but then we really would be here all day. Don't worry, I know it hurts, but you'll live too. I bet you don't believe it, but I'm really not put here to test your faith, or really for any reason at all. I'm just here, so you can believe me when I say everything you know is wrong. One thing you can believe is that we were prepared to just have a bunch of our guys come in with DTRS and kill the bunch of you. Isn't it better this way? Now you have a chance at a fresh start. You'll have to pay for what you've done, but maybe that'll take long enough for you to learn.”

She cleared her throat and said more commandingly, “That goes for the rest of you too! This is the second time I've saved you, don't waste it!”

And that was it, she was done. Well, mostly. She walked over to Liza, who was still shielding her eyes by the busted table, “You alright?” Any degree of jealousy was gone from Ryuko, replaced by overwhelming guilt. With her hearing she knew full well the humiliation she'd suffered being stripped and beaten and molested by Godfrey and his lackeys. And she'd been so happy before! Ryuko wanted to cry just like Liza was currently, and she had to remind herself that it wasn't time yet.

None of these people knew her, they didn't know that what had been done to Liza and all the other deaths today stood as a harsh, harsh lesson. Punishment for running off like an idiot, for not taking responsibility for their safety even when she was the only one who could. To them she was so much greater than they that any sign of human weakness wouldn't make any sense. But she wanted Liza to see it, and Satsuki too – because she'd already figured out that something extraordinary had happen to Ryuko and so had to be reassured that it was still her inside.

Liza was speechless, so Ryuko murmured, “It's over. I've got you.”

And without hesitation Liza threw her arms around Ryuko's middle, still sniffing, “Thankyou thankyou thankyou thankyou!”

She wasn't alone. Now that it was over, plenty of the other guests stood and crept up to her. Ryuko looked up and smiled gently, and was less surprised when they knelt down before her. Why they did it, Ryuko wasn't sure, but they knew full well that there was only one way to show sufficient gratitude to a higher being. And besides, doing this together was the only distraction they had from breaking down with relief, which was better done in private. *Ah geez. Best let them do it.* Liza yelped and tried to back up and kneel as well, but Ryuko held on and kept her standing.

But when her father came up and tried to speak to her, Ryuko rounded on him jabbed a finger into his soft chest. “What were you thinking? Selling us out like that!”

The Executive Minister all but jumped, “I'm sorry! He was going to kill her and I-I just -”

“You think that's an excuse. Look, is she dead?”

“N-no,” And when he looked to Liza, she shot him a reproachful look as well, which was enough to convince him he’d really fucked up, “... We are all in your debt. I don’t know how we could ever repay you.”

Ryuko smirked and shot Satsuki a little glance “Well you could start by giving the Kamui Corps permanent non-negotiable permission to fight on your land. And anything else that Satsuki can think of. I’m sure you two can work out the details.”

The Executive Minister was so red that it looked like he might have a heart attack, “Of course, of course Lady Ryuko – anything!”

Satsuki had to raise her eyebrows. Everything she wanted and more indeed. Did Ryuko really think this would work? That it would be binding? Actually yes, she did. Ryuko didn’t know any of the theory of power politics, but she’d executed it wickedly. Everyone could plainly see which of them was in charge, and any reneging on her demands would just look weasely now. Yeah, this could work.

Satsuki walked up now, and the crowd parted in front of her. “How’s that sound?” Ryuko asked her.

“Amazing. But there’s something I have to do first,” Satsuki said, and Ryuko tilted her head – they’d run to the end of the plan. “I must apologize to all of you. Godfrey was right, I did bring you here under false pretenses.”

“Wait, hold on - ” Before Ryuko could protest much, Satsuki stepped right into her, pulled her close around the waist, and kissed her. It took *tremendous* focus to imagine that it was only the two of them in the room for that split second, although the overpowering light from Ryuko’s wings helped blot them out. She could still hear all their gasps, but it had to be done. For Ryuko, who’d let her guard down now that her role was finished, this momentarily broke her brain. It made sense – stupidly, illogically, but still it made sense. Save the day, get the girl. She tried to deepen the kiss, pull Satsuki yet closer, but when she felt Satsuki’s hand tense realized she was much more embarrassed than she let on, and so Ryuko broke it off, eyes still wide with lovestruck shock.

“I’m afraid the engagement is off. Ryuko and I are in love. And... we have been for quite some time.”

~~~~~

The triage teams were quick to arrive, and panicked servants and family members for those who managed to go mostly unharmed. The palace buzzed with somber activity as its doors unlocked and the rest of the world poured in to wash the day’s carnage away in a tide of sanitary gloves and sirens.

Even though Ryuko and Satsuki had stayed in the middle of the ballroom, nobody really paid them much mind except to stay out of their way. Ryuko had retracted the little tendrils of herself back in, locked them up, and now she looked for all the world just the same as she had years ago when she’d first come to Honoujji. If you didn’t know any better just an ordinary girl, a very troubled looking one at that.

“Fuck, look,” she nodded to the bodies on the ground. Now that all the survivors who could walk had left all the wounded and dead could be seen much more clearly, “There’s so many that aren’t moving...”

Satsuki was behind her with her arms around her shoulders, so she barely noticed it at first, “Ryuko are you... crying?”

She was. A big fat drop rolled off her cheek and landed on Satsuki’s hand. “Sats we were too late!”

Satsuki nodded, “But once we’d realized our mistakes we moved as fast as we could. Can’t we take some consolation in knowing nobody could’ve done better in our place?”

“In our place?” Ryuko turned around and Satsuki processed for the first time how truly aggrieved she was, “What does it matter? We were still too late for them!”

“Ryuko i-it’s alright,” Satsuki faltered, realizing that she was no good at comforting someone when their grief couldn’t be rationalized away. And then she remembered that thing Ryuko had said after she pummeled Godfrey. That living was infinitely preferable, even living with a broken body. What did she know? “What’s gotten into you?”

“What’s gotten into me? What’s wrong with you, more like! You should be crying too!”

“But I...”

“You always say you have to wipe your own tears, but how can you if you won’t even cry Sats? They’re *dead* because of us!”

And Satsuki did cry. Not for the innocent who’d died today, even though she felt tremendous guilt at her callous disregard for their lives she couldn’t summon any tears. She cried for herself, for the promise she’d broken. She’d walled off what she’d done that day, like all the bloodshed she’d ordered and committed at Honoujji, and never intended to think of it again. But the wall broke then, seeing Ryuko who’d stood so brave and glorious just minutes ago leveled by her guilt. Could she really pretend her will was stronger?

She cried for the first time since she was four years old, and Ryuko squeezed her tight as this unfamiliar sensation, this stinging in her eyes and cramping in her cheeks, contorted her face into an ugly wince.

She was a murderer. Now and forever.

~~~~~

It was early evening, a few hours later, and Ryuko sat on the edge of a broad patio that faced out onto the beach. Things were finally starting to quiet down, but there were still plenty of airplanes and helicopters and ships taking people away. Soon only a skeleton crew would be left on the island, its reputation as an international neutral point sunk forever. In the very far distance a pale grey bar showed where the battleship Satsuki had called, which had ended up basically going for an afternoon spin, was now turning back towards Japan.

Ryuko basked in it. The sand between her toes, the noise of the gently lapping waves, the calls of the seagulls, the salt spray on her face. The way Satsuki’s bare feet – well, one bare foot and a big puffy splint on her broken toe, to replace the one she’d made herself – padded across the patio. The smell of the food she was carrying.

“Nice place you chose.”

“Yeah well its far enough away that the paparazzi hasn’t tracked us down yet. Enough excitement for one day, eh?”

“Indeed.”

“You brought us something!” Ryuko exclaimed, as though she hadn’t smelt the food from yards off. Satsuki sat down beside her gracefully, a broken toe wouldn’t stop that. She’d changed from the scraps of her dress into just a blouse and short, summery skirt, but Ryuko hadn’t taken off her outfit even if it was a little frayed and singed at the edges – not that Satsuki minded. She saw in Ryuko’s eyes not the thousand-yard stare or the righteous fury, but bright, bubbly wonder. So much that she almost felt like she could cry again.

“In a miraculous turn, it seems the palace kitchens made it through mostly unscathed. When I explained who it was for they insisted,” She passed over Ryuko’s plate, a little slice of cake with yellow frosting – small, but just the right amount. “Enjoy.”

“Mmm! Lemon frosting. How’d you know?” Ryuko asked sarcastically.

Satsuki chuckled, “You know, I can’t help but feel that we already know every detail about each other. And we’ve only been dating, what, a few hours?”

Ryuko was chewing so she couldn’t laugh, but she did make an appreciative noise. “We must be geniuses or somethin’,” She quipped as she swallowed. “Or *soul mates*.”

“But really though. For instance, your favorite dessert is anything with lemon flavor, your favorite drink malt whiskey, your favorite type of weapon a pair of wakizashi.” (This being the closest generic type to her scissors in terms of length and balance)

“Mhm! Three for three!” Ryuko heartily agreed, “And your favorite dessert’s... dark chocolate.”

“Naturally.”

“And your favorite drink, even if you don’t drink much, it’s gotta be red wine, right?”

“It’s called a Merlot, dear. But yes, growing up I had to at least acquire a connoisseur’s taste for it, and I guess it’s stuck with me.”

“Nuh-uh! That’s a fancy cheese! Mako bought some once, you can’t fool me!”

“It’s actually both.”

“No way! They must just sound similar or somethin’.”

Satsuki hummed, “Whatever you say.”

Ryuko devoured her cake, luxuriating in the taste of it, and her ability to taste it at all. When she finished she couldn’t help but side-eye the large tray of sashimi Satsuki had gotten for herself. Dark grey-white smoked fish with a sharp smelling glaze “Whatcha got there?”

“Oh, well, this type of eel was always one of my favorites. But don’t worry, you’ve never seen me eating it because its banned in Japan, since they’re endangered. But apparently here they don’t care about trivial things like that, so I thought-”

“-Just this once?”

“Exactly.”

“Sure. You’ve earned it, I’d say. That and more... gosh, it does smell good though.”

“I can have them bring you out some, if you’d like. We’re in no rush.”

“Nah, I can’t eat a full tray, I’m already stuffed.”

“Well, there you go then,” Satsuki said.

“... You really want to eat the whole thing yourself don’t you?”

“I do,” Satsuki replied resolutely.

“Fine then,” Before Satsuki could react, Ryuko had gently pinched the chopsticks from her fingers.

“Wha-hey!”

“Relax! I’m not stealing it! Here, let me help,” She carefully grabbed a piece, “Open wide!”

Satsuki looked adorably baffled, “You can’t be serious.”

“Sats, this is the sort of thing people do when they’re dating! Try it!” The way Ryuko said “dating” made Satsuki hope that this meant she’d won, and Rei was no longer in the picture. True or not, Satsuki chose to believe it for now

Begrudgingly, she complied. Irrationally she feared Ryuko would do something clumsy like jab her in the back of the mouth, but she should have known better for Ryuko was as delicate and precise as was inhumanly possible. Satsuki closed her mouth and was taken aback when Ryuko chuckled - her eyes squinting that way meant she was really entertained.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothin’ nothin’! You’re just too cute is all,” Ryuko smiled, and Satsuki’s embarrassment broke into a smile as well. Nobody ever called Satsuki cute. Gorgeous, divine, statuesque, sexy, but not cute. She decided to try and do things that would make Ryuko call her cute more often.

They sat quietly while Satsuki finished, and when she was done eating she set the tray aside and rested her head on Ryuko’s shoulder. A seagull was drawn in by the smell, but Ryuko waved a life-fiber tendril at it and it flew off to look for easier scraps.

“Hey, about today,” Ryuko asked, “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I feel about as well as can be expected. Why?”

“Well, it’s just when I said you should be crying I didn’t expect you to cry for like, half an hour!” If anything this was an underestimate.

Satsuki shook her head, “That was... a long time coming, believe me. I should have done it years ago. It felt good, actually.”



Ryuko shrugged, “Sometimes it can... I’m proud of you for that, y’know? I wasn’t sure you had it in you.”

“I wasn’t sure either. I’ve gotten very good at suppressing the unpleasant. But I feel I should be asking the same question to you.”

“What about?”

“Ryuko earlier today I saw... a vision, I want to say. A giant eye, just for an instant, filling the hallway in front of me. But the thing was it wasn’t just a vision, after it was gone I could see where it had been. Ryuko, it was your eye.”

Ryuko’s face froze, “Holy shit.”

“You wouldn’t tell me before what happened to you today. Please, Ryuko.”

“I want to Sats, really, but it was so... it’s like I can remember it but if I try to put it into words I... it’s just so unbelievable.”

“If it hadn’t been for seeing that eye, I might not have looked behind me. It saved my life.”

Well, Ryuko couldn’t resist that. She started from the top, but started floundering the very moment she was awakened to her true body. Satsuki listened attentively through the whole thing. But in the end Ryuko left just about everything that she’d experienced in the wider universe out. She just didn’t even know where to begin, trying and failing to give an impression of what it was like until she had to move on.

“... And when I came back to my body, it was before I’d even gotten shot! It was like I had willed it so that just never happened!” She finally finished. Satsuki’s face was blank, contemplative. Ryuko wasn’t making much sense, but what she could understand was that she’d traveled to some other sort of universe, probably what Shiro called the life-fiber’s home dimension, and inhabited a body that was some kind of mirror image of her, only also huge and monstrous.

“Well, that sounds horrible. But at least we know what happens if you get attacked like that again, and that you can come back.”

Ryuko shook her head, “No, you don’t get it. I have to go back.”

“Go back! W-why?”

“Senketsu was there,” Ryuko said, with none of the gravitas something like that required. Satsuki’s mouth dropped.

“Sen- you – you mean *your* Senketsu?”

“Mhm!”

“Then he’s alive?”

“Alive and well. In fact, he’s probably watching us right now.”

Satsuki let out an elated laugh, “Well that’s wonderful Ryuko! Oh! I’m so happy for you!” She threw her arms around her and squeezed her tight, “You do have to go bring him back, of course.”

But Ryuko shook her head, “That’s his home. He lives there.”

That seemed incongruent, but Satsuki realized she wasn’t going to understand and didn’t try to pry further. And she said as much, “I don’t think I understand.” Ryuko opened her mouth to try and explain, “And I don’t think I’m going to. You go, do some experiments with Houka and Shiro, they’ll figure it out.”

“Oh I’m going to. But I can visit him, that’s the thing.”

Ryuko seemed happy about that so Satsuki embraced this not worry about understanding it idea and was satisfied with it too, “You must have had so much to tell him.”

“Oh man, did I. It felt like a thousand years we were there.”

“Maybe it really was, if you were able to come back to a different time than you left.”

Ryuko shrugged, “But y’know, as soon as I saw him I just felt like everything became so clear. He helped me understand something.”

“Hmm?”

“I know I’ve been acting differently since I came back. It’s because of what I realized,” She smiled at the sky, looking philosophical. “I can’t live a normal life. That’s just not me.”

Satsuki nodded, “And you once told me that’s all you wanted.”

“But it’s just not possible, don’t you see? And I wouldn’t want it to be, either. I’m not afraid of what I am anymore.”

Satsuki nodded along and Ryuko continued, “I’ve been thinking for years that I have all these powers, why don’t they make anything work out better for me? But really what needed to change was me, my attitude. I need to be the one to take charge. You’ve been telling me I need to apply myself for how long now, since we first met? Maybe it doesn’t seem to hard anymore, now that I know all my little problems are so small compared to the real me. What, what’s that face?”

“Nothing,” Satsuki said. “You’re absolutely right.”

Ryuko chuckled, “And here I was afraid you’d be scared.”

“Scared? Only that you might not still be you. What else would I be scared of?”

“Oh, y’know,” Ryuko relaxed her grip on herself and let those wings explode out from a nowhere point on her back.

No, Satsuki wasn’t scared of that, if anything she felt incredibly privileged. She lifted a finger to the wingtip and moved through it, watching as it phased through like it wasn’t even there. The lattice of intricate threads changed and morphed around her finger, and Ryuko giggled, “That tickles!”

“Oh! Sorry,” Satsuki sat up sheepishly, “I just wanted to try it before.”

“Not it’s... not the annoying kind of tickles. You can keep doing it if you want.” So Satsuki did. The more she played with the wing, the more it vibrated. She imagined it like she was petting some

kind of cosmic cat whose purring warped the surrounding air.

“You see what I mean? I’m not remotely human. I’m not even any kind of animal or alien. This is only the tiniest fraction of a fraction of what I am. And you’re really not scared?”

“Of course not. You’re something some people call a god, and you’re in love with me. It’s a bold new frontier. No way I’d ever walk away from that. And besides,” She leaned in very close to Ryuko’s ear, “How can we be sisters if you aren’t even human.

A devilish smile crossed Ryuko’s face.

“Never again will that word be spoken between us,” Satsuki declared.

“What word?” Ryuko quipped.

“Precisely. If ever we are questioned, most of the world had no inkling of any blood linkage between us.”

“Well yeah, but – hey, y’know what I don’t get? Why’d you go and kiss me in front of everyone in the ballroom? I mean, I thought we could probably make sure everyone who saw us the first time stayed quiet, buy ‘em off or something, right?”

Satsuki laughed, “Ryuko you forget. Houka was listening in via my earpiece the whole time.”

“Pfahahaha!” It was so blindingly simple Ryuko had to laugh, “Yeah alright, fair enough. Goddamn that sly bastard.”

“He got more than he bargained for, I’d say. Although it does raise the question of what to do with our close friends and family. Best thing is to get them all together and confront the issue head on, explain why if they have any objections it’s best they keep their mouths shut. I don’t know who of them would disapprove for sure besides Nonon and Rei, so it’s best to plan how to persuade each of them. Let’s see, for Ira I think Mako’s probably our best bet...”

Ryuko listened to Satsuki carefully brainstorming, confident that it would all work out in the end. It’s funny, she’d looked at the Earth and it’s living creatures, all combined together into one super-organism, as slower, stupider than her when she’d been in her true body. But that wasn’t the case at all, no, because Satsuki was part of it. And Houka, Shiro, hell, every brilliant scientist who’d ever lived. She could barely handle having a couple thousand of herself, and yet it had billions of people way smarter than her, and they were all so different! They even worked against each other, imagine if the all the different lines of thought tried to kill and shout over each other. No, this world was far smarter than she was, just a different kind of smart, an alternate life-style she couldn’t grasp.

More than ever before she saw how precious this thing called Earth was. How even though it was defenseless against the life-fibers on its own, it was everything worth protecting from them.

“Hey, Sats, chill out for sec, would you?”

“Okay, but I was just – of course, sorry. What is it?”

“Just calm down, don’t worry about that for a second.”

“It is important we get our story straight though.”

“Just sit here and look with me for a moment.”

The sky was starting to turn yellow. In the distance the battleship was finally vanishing over the horizon. Tiny crabs emerged from burrows near the waves and began combing the beach for food particles, dipping back into their hiding places when a bird's shadow passed overhead.

“Isn't it beautiful?”

“Which part?”

“Well, all of it.”

# Protection

## Chapter Summary

Holy shit this one was supposed to be short.

March 2067

~~~~~

Nonon shot up awake with a gasp, hand siezing on her chest. Just a moment ago she'd been resting easily – she'd heard the report from Houka, something had gone wrong with Satsuki's diplomatic marriage mission, but since everything had apparently worked out fine in the end she didn't let it keep her up worrying. But now something felt beyond unusual. Her heart was racing, her head cramping, her body trembling with raw energy, her muscles spasmed with tightness, the scarred tips of her fingers stung with numbness. It demanded that she get up and move around, *now*. She knew what an adrenaline rush felt like quite well, and at first she was convinced that somehow that was what was happening. But something else was happening too.

Something warm and sweet and fluid was surrounding her body, permeating it, like warm molasses that somehow percolated through her body. She was sweating bullets from the sensation. What the hell was this?

*Someone my age should **not** be having a heart attack. No, that's not right. Maybe it's a panic attack? I don't know anyone with that condition. Can it happen in dead of night? What would I even have to panic about?*

*[Nonon, this **aura!** It's overwhelming, I – I feel so...]* Saiban was feeling it, even more powerfully, and he didn't have organs that could react with exhilaration and pain so he just got the electrifying fluid, bubbling up from inside him, a hot-spring of energy that wasn't his. From his hanger next to the great wide bed he was glowing so bright that it was like the light was dripping from him. And on the other side, on her hanger, Seijitsu was also glowing like that.

“What the-” Nonon whipped her head around, and sure enough Uzu's eyes were wide open too, bare chest slick with sweat, hand clenching on his chest.

He grimaced when he noticed her looking, “So you're feeling it too, huh?”

*[Seijitsu, are you-]*

*[Yes, but it can't be-]*

*[This aura, I would recognize it anywhere but-]*

*[She's nowhere near here! It doesn't even **feel** like she's near here, it's-]*

“Guys, hold on,” Uzu sat up, “Slow down, who?”

But Nonon held up a finger. She was better at identifying auras than Uzu and Saiban felt them more strongly than Seijitsu, but even so she couldn't blame him for not getting it, it made no sense. She hadn't felt this presence since leaving for Indonesia and now it made her skin crawl. Uzu wasn't far behind though and his eyes widened as he understood.

"Ryuko," He mouthed. "But how? It's not like when Seijitsu senses her nearby, it's like its coming from -"

"-Inside the Kamui, yeah." Nonon stood up, grabbed Saiban, and quickly put him on – or really just shoved him over her at let him mold himself to her slender body. "Alright, what the hell is going on?"

There wasn't really any good answer. Nonon flung open the curtain, half expecting Ryuko to be out there taking part in some kind of apocalyptic event casting light across the horizon. Houka had said everything had worked out fine for them today, but the message was brief. Maybe fine was doing a lot of legwork there. Ryuko had done something she wasn't supposed to know about yet, something earth shattering, Nonon was sure of it.

But whatever it was it at least wasn't a calamity Nonon could see. Below their balcony the city of New Jakarta bustled with life, campfires burning, streets milling with unseen thronging masses of refugees and fighters, makeshift walls around the perimeter awash with floodlights and prickling with gun turrets. Her kingdom was undisturbed.

Nonon shrugged. There wasn't anything left to say or do except wait impatiently to see if the feeling faded. And it did, or at least the initial painful shock did. And then all that was left was the feeling of the waves of soothing energy radiating through them. Uzu watched Nonon's face turn red and Nonon watched his go blank and his eyes dart evasively. It was wrong to enjoy this feeling, Ryuko was doing this somehow – their Ryuko. This degree of intimacy with her was something even the Kamui weren't prepared for.

Without a word Nonon rushed to the bathroom and shut the door, "Okay Saiban what the hell is she doing to you?"

*[Nothing!]* He replied back, just as agitated but more out of confusion than the embarrassment that burned in Nonon, although he understood that plenty well, *[I just sense her presence but I can't seem to locate from where. It's like she's right beside me, all around me, but every time I think I've got it slips away!]*

"She's not doing anything?"

*[No. She's just... there,]* Saiban didn't want to tell Nonon that now that the initial burst of energy was gone it wasn't *at all* unpleasant, but of course she could tell. She could also tell that he was wincing internally – she'd decided Ryuko was her enemy and with good reason, he couldn't betray her. But it really was just her presence, all it did was provide that same sense of warmth and togetherness that being near Seijitsu did, just on a larger scale. She remembered reading that in ancient times when the winter was at its worst farmers would sleep cozied up to their farm animals in one big pile. It was the only comparison that came to mind besides one she couldn't accept – a mother and child. Neither analogy fit right, but that one just made Nonon shudder and – no. No that just wasn't right. She didn't even wish Shiro was here to study it. No scientific explanation could account for this.

Uzu knocked on the door, "You okay in there?"

“Yeah?”

“We think Ryuko maybe developed some kind of telepathy power today, maybe she doesn’t know how to use it properly yet and it’s going off at random.”

Nonon immediately perked up. Yes, that must be it!

*[I mean, it’s possible. There’s lots possibilities out there none of us understand,]* Saiban said, but it didn’t feel quite right. This was definitely not normal Ryuko signal – it felt larger, more ponderous, less emotional. But for now, a mundane explanation like that wasn’t the worst thing.

“Yeah, that could be. I guess. Fuckin’ freaky though.”

“Mmm,” Uzu grunted in agreement, “Y’know I just try to roll with this kinda weird thing. Comes with the territory and all, eh? ...Well, uh, I’m gonna go back to sleep now if you’re sure you’re okay.”

“You’re terrible at reassuring people, you know that, right?”

“S-should I come in there?”

“Nah, nah, I’ll just...” Nonon didn’t finish that thought and came back out of the bathroom, draped her arms around Uzu, and let him carry her back to bed and hold her close as he nodded off. The feeling didn’t go away, but fuck it, she was tired. Nothing was going to get resolved in the morning.

But before she did sleep, she and Saiban agreed on two things. Firstly, there was no chance Ryuko really had been possessed by Ragyo secretly – this was her, no doubt about it. Second, more important, was that Saiban’s initial assessment that this version of Ryuko was unemotional was wrong. There was an undertone of something there, something Nonon had never expected to feel from Ryuko. Gentle, caring, unconditional love – wasn’t this something only Mako could draw out of her? It felt wrong to enjoy it, but honestly there was no denying that exactly what they did as Nonon drifted off.

There were no words, but it seemed to be saying, *Sleep, be at peace. I’m here, I’ll watch over you while you rest.*

~~~~~

“Alright, done,” Houka sat up in his neural interface chair and pushed his glasses up.

“How’d it go?” Shiro, across the room, was busily running a molecular DNA sequence simulator in his chair. This was their typical evening activity – wired into their Kamui’s supercomputer components, getting a lot of research done at speeds never before conceived of. Except tonight Houka wasn’t doing research.

“Not so bad, actually. Turns out the only time it comes up on Honnouji’s security cameras was that one exchange between Ryuko and Ragyo at the sports festival. The one where she ripped Ryuko’s heart out?”

“Ah yes, right. That’s gotta go.”

“Yes, and with a little tweaking you can’t hear what they’re saying, and then a little splicing and their lips read completely differently. And now there’s no sign there that Ryuko and Satsuki might

be remotely related.”

“But there were a lot of people in the arena at the time. They were all a bit more focused on running for their live, but still.”

Houka sighed, “Nothing to be done about that. If anyone decides to say something for some reason, it’ll be our word against theirs. Ryuko’s said publicly that her father worked in Ragyo’s lab and was loyal to her until she tried to take Ryuko from him, and Rei said in her interview that Ragyo tried to create Ryuko and Nui as supplements to her own real daughter when Satsuki’s hybridization failed.”

“Which is true,” Shiro noted, “Even if she ‘created’ Ryuko the traditional way.”

“Quite. So if any random person recollects that, they’ll probably just think she meant it metaphocially.”

Shiro affirmed that with a nod, then said, “And what about REVOCS?”

“Well, that’s the funny thing. Misaki combed all of the files we got from the old REVOCS tower and it turns out in Ragyo’s personal database she’d already falsified the records to say that she’d miscarried. Ryuko didn’t even have a name back then, so there already wasn’t anything to remove. So if any of them know the truth, which I’m not sure they do, once again it’ll be our word against theirs.”

“Is that everything then?”

*~[I also went through all of our friend’s text conversations and deleted anything that identifies them as sisters, in case their phones ever got hacked,]~* Mikasi chimed in proudly.

“You don’t think they’ll notice?”

*~[Nah. Who ever looks at their text history anyway? If anything I should’ve wiped all of their texts, there’s an 85% chance they’d just be grateful I cleared up the storage space on their phones . ]~*

Shiro nodded. They’d taken care of everything. Houka sighed with relief, leaning back. When he first witnessed Satsuki kissing Ryuko – both hearing it happen over Satsuki’s earpiece and seeing it through the security cameras – he froze in shock and embarrassment, but then almost reflexively started laughing. Of course! Logic rebelled against what he was seeing, but at the same time it just made too much sense. What an interesting challenge Satsuki had given him today. He had placed questions like “how long has this been going on?” “who else knows about them?” “what will happen next?” in the back of his mind until now, because fixing this mess was his job.

“I just feel bad for Rei,” He said.

“Did she know?” Shiro asked.

“Oh undoubtably. It’s actually the reason they broke up.”

“Really?”

*~[I’ve actually been able to construct a pretty good timeline of events from all the texts I went through, take a look,]~* Misaki said, and Shiro’s eyes defocused as Izanami accessed the timeline



and showed him (They didn't even need screens anymore, far easier on the eyes, which of course meant they could stay up even later).

"Huh. So it looks like they first acknowledged their mutual attraction in May or so, long after Ryuko started dating Rei so she probably had been attracted before then but knew it was pointless, and then... ah, interesting. Rei must have found out at some point in the early fall, and then confronted Ryuko about it at which point she stormed out. And then," At this part Shiro interrupted himself to chuckle, "Oh wow *interesting* Ryuko went with Satsuki on that weekend trip up to her lake house, and came back feeling much better."

"My hypothesis is that it's that weekend that they had sex for the first time."

"Why's that?"

"Well, afterward there are lots of text conversations between them about Ryuko spending the night over at Satsuki's. Maybe one, two times a week. And none beforehand."

~[*Plus Ryuko wouldn't do that to Rei,*]~ Misaki said emphatically.

"Well, you don't *know* that," Shiro said with scientific detachment.

"No, but I do agree with her," Houka said, "Either way, the other important thing about that weekend is that Nonon called Satsuki while she was there, and you can see I don't have the transcript of the call but she must've figured it out somehow because she was very upset with Satsuki right before she left."

"And wouldn't tell you why?"

"I honestly thought nothing of it. I assumed she was nervous and I was misreading it to be about Satsuki for some reason, more fool me. Either way, she knows too."

"The two I'd expect to be the most upset, but yet neither of them said anything to us, or to the general public" Shiro observed and Houka nodded in agreement.

"Which is why I'm not terribly worried about anyone suddenly feeling a moral compunction to shout 'they're sisters' to the world. They understand that if people lost faith in Ryuko or Satsuki the effects would be catastrophic."

"Could be. People might just say 'who cares',"

~[*The general reaction to the breaking news online is very, very positive*]~ Izanami reported merrily, ~[*People around the world are very happy for them*].

Houka nodded, "That's not really what I'm concerned about, honestly. This could produce some very real... er, friction."

"It could tear us apart, you mean," Shiro said gravely. He was dead right, and in the end that was what bothered Houka most.

"Quite," He replied tersely, "Rei may never forgive Ryuko, or at least not for a long time, but that's okay. We can keep up with them separately, that's what we're already doing. But Nonon has to come around." The thought that Nonon could be anything other than Satsuki's closest, most loyal

confidant and her true best friend it was, well, unthinkable. That was just one of the facts of life, it couldn't be changed.

Shiro nodded. He, of course, felt the same way. Even before everyone else it had always just been Satsuki, Nonon, and him. This was trivial, honestly he didn't see anything wrong with it, Nonon would have to see that there was no problem.

"Uzu might be helpful," Houka continued thoughtfully, "I *know* he won't care. But, on the other hand if Nonon really insists he may take her side."

"If it's that or sleeping on the couch," Shiro chuckled. "We'll have to wait until morning when he gets the news. Let's see, who else."

"Ira and Tsumugu. They're the ones who might object. Mako might be of help with Ira though, might help him see things from Ryuko's perspective. Tsumugu... I'm not sure. He might be swayed by a logical argument, if we can persuade him that it's the best thing for both of them and we've taken all necessary precautions. But on the other hand this is a classic Kiryuin scenario, and... oh I don't know. We'll see."

"Yes, I think that about covers it. We'll see indeed," Shiro trailed off. The others, he thought, would learn to accept it. But he didn't want to wait for Nonon to learn – besides, knowing her seeing the others adjust might just make her dig her heels in more. The unity, camaraderie, the unbreakable bonds that had allowed them to weather the war against Ragyo were now being tested and Shiro would rather just skip over that to the part where everyone was one big happy family again.

"... Oh, fine," Houka had read his silence as leading towards a question, "What do you think about it?"

Shiro laughed a short, clipped little laugh, "You know I'm the last person who would dare oppose Satsuki on questions of right and wrong."

"Oh, why do I bother asking?"

"Aside from that, there's undeniably chemistry there. We've all seen it for years now. Ever since the moment Ryuko first showed up, really. Perhaps it will be good for both of them. Izanami, of course, feels the same."

*~[I'm happy for them!]*~ She added. *~[I'm not happy Ryuko wasn't honest with Rei, no, that was bad. But considering the circumstances... what would she even have said? So we'll forgive her, eventually.]*~ Shiro nodded. In matters like this he deferred to Izanami, because he didn't care one way or the other.

"Well, what about you?" Shiro asked.

"You know what confuses me? Why now?" Houka said with a thoughtful hand on his chin. "This is the sort of thing you'd expect her to never reveal under pain of death, so what exactly was Satsuki's plan?"

"Well, I've known her longer than anyone and in all that time I've *never* seen any hint of romantic interest from her before this. Hell, we didn't even know she was gay until junior year. So we really have no way to know how she'd react to actually falling for someone."

“Sure, but that’s not really what I meant. Why *today* specifically?”

“Well, I – hmm... Perhaps the life and death situation made her more inclined to seize the moment. Only other alternative is that it was part of their plan.”

“But that doesn’t sound much like Satsuki, does it? She’s been in much worse situations. And it’s not a plan, Misaki show him,” Misaki sent over the footage of both time Ryuko and Satsuki had kissed, “Ryuko is surprised, see? She wasn’t expecting Satsuki to reveal this.”

“Hmm...”

“Something happened, and I think I know... here!” Houka found the security camera footage of the moment when The Eye appeared, “See, Satsuki’s walking along, then suddenly – the camera shorts out.”

“An electromagnetic pulse?”

“Seems so, and when it comes back online she’s on the ground, looks startled, and... hellooo!” Houka found the ring of scorch marks, zoomed in on it. Now all of them were seeing the unnatural after-effects of Ryuko’s momentary intrusion, watching Satsuki knock out the traumatized older woman who witnessed it. “Something happened. Something that changed Satsuki’s mind instantly. But what?”

And then, as though he’d spoke it into being, the same baffling presence that was invading on Saiban and Seijitsu struck them. But rather than panic, their instinct was to freeze. To observe. It faded, lingered on for minutes, and eventually disappeared leaving them feeling leaden and exhausted.

*Sleep, be at peace. I’m here, I’ll watch over you while you rest.*

And when it was done, Houka and Shiro looked at each other with that idiotic “I’ve just made a huge discovery” grin on their faces.

“Holy shit.”

~~~~~

Ryuko and Satsuki didn’t end up getting off the island. They were too exhausted, and crashed in a hotel room without even bothering to brush their teeth. Of course, the place was luxurious and almost as comfortable as being home. But Satsuki’s dreams were far from at ease.

She was back in the palace ballroom, smoke and dead bodies all around, not a thing moving. The smell was appalling, she nearly choked on it. She picked her way over the floor with bare feet, avoiding broken glass and plates and snapped off bits of jewelry. There was a great pain in her chest, but she couldn’t seem to bring herself to look down and see the cause.

*“Come to me. I can take you away from this place,”* It was Ryuko’s voice! She was standing before Satsuki, arms outstretched like a statue, hair ablaze with light and luminous wings drifting behind her. Blood trickled from her hands, but she seemed unaware of it– of anything except Satsuki. Her eyes were serene and distant, untroubled by the carnage around her.

Terror gripped Satsuki. She needed to go with Ryuko, or she'd surely die! But for some reason she knew, before she even tried she knew it wouldn't work. She realized she was doomed, and there was only so long Ryuko would wait.

*"Please. I don't want you to hurt anymore,"* The light behind Ryuko grew every stronger, blinding, and with the illumination casting around her Satsuki could see the faces of all the bodies. Liza. Her father. Godfrey. Yuda. The assassin she'd killed. The woman Yuda had dueled. The old lady she'd knocked out. Plenty of others she recognized too, all united in death.

*"You must come with me. You can do it!"*

*"Satsuki, please."*

But...

"I'm sorry, I-I can't. This is where I belong."

Ryuko didn't seem to hear her, or if she did would not acknowledge it. *"You must come with me Satsuki, it's the only way."*

The invisible pressure Ryuko exerted grew stronger, like a magnet, but Satsuki's feet were rooted to the spot. The floor felt softer, the rug was rotting away into a slushy, fibrous mud.

*"Satsuki"*

Wirey white fungus crept up the walls and they crumbled, revealing a neverending plain and roiling grey clouds beyond. In due course even the fungus was rotting too.

*"Satsuki"*

Maggots popped from the gelatinous flesh of the corpses around her, anything recognizable about them distorted and fading.

*"Satsuki"*

Was everything around her getting larger? Or was she shrinking? Satsuki watched in horror as Ryuko seemed to recede into the distance, growing still taller, still further away, until her head was in the clouds, casting light through them in blinding rays. The entire horizon was ablaze now with pure white brilliance.

*"Satsuki"*

And Satsuki looked down at herself and didn't see the body of a grown woman, but her younger self, a child no older than four. And that pain in her chest... the skin was grey and necrotizing. Something was rotting her from the inside out. And it was next to her that she saw her adult body, dead just like all the rest. Eyes forever unseeing, mouth slightly open, flesh pale and veiny, heart and lungs torn out and spread across the ground in meaty piles.

And she realized that it didn't really matter either way. If she stayed here, she would die. But if she went with Ryuko, wherever she was trying to take her, she wouldn't be herself anymore.

"Satsuki! C'mon, wake up!"

With a jolt, Satsuki's eyes shot open. Ryuko was shaking her by the shoulder, holding something small and heavy over her chest. Her phone, screen lit up and buzzing.

"Whu-izzit?" She sleepily mumbled.

"It's Houka. You wanna answer it or nah?"

Houka. It must be important. She took the phone from Ryuko, answered, "Houka, hello."

~"Ah, Satsuki, thank you for answering. I wanted to report that I've finished a complete search for everything relating to the issue from earlier today,"~ Satsuki knew what he meant – he'd wiped every piece of information that might suggest Ryuko was her sister from the internet, effectively deleting that fact from accessible information.

"Thank you. I appreciate that. Is there anything else?"

~ "No, the process went smoothly. Er, by the way, Satsuki, did something happen to Ryuko today?"~

Satsuki had to think about how to answer that one. He clearly knew something, but what? "She's right her, quite fine, I can assure you. She did have a pretty rough day, but she's perfectly unharmed in every way."

Ryuko furrowed her eyebrows in confusion, and then thought about the time. Yeah, this was about when she'd found her Kamui, drifting restfully in the currents of space, when she'd gone to see them. It had been night, all their human counterparts had been either asleep or on the way to sleep. How that worked when that was clearly in the past for her but yet had only now just happened, she wasn't going to think about.

~"Well yes, but-"~

"Hey, Sats, let me see that real quick."

"One moment, please, Ryuko wants to speak to you."

~ "Even better. Pass me over."~

Satsuki obliged, and Ryuko rolled over to stare at the ceiling as she talked. "Hey, something the matter?"

Houka started talking quite rapidly. He'd said even better but actually talking to Ryuko, when the faded aftershock of her feeling of unconditional love was passing through him, was not what he had in mind. He had no idea she felt so deeply attached to him and Shiro and maybe more importantly Izanami and Misaki. It was quite uncomfortable, actually, almost like he was afraid if he asked about it she'd say it wasn't real. ~"Yes, actually. We've had a very unusual disturbance, almost – well how to explain – almost as though you were -"~

"Right there with you?"

~ "...Y-yeah, pretty much."~

"Yeah, I know what's causing that. Don't worry about it, I can basically control it."

~ “Really? Well, what is it?” ~ Houka was shocked, but Ryuko sighed.

“Can it wait til morning? I was gonna come to lab anyway, we’ve actually got a lot to discuss.”

~ “I think we’d appreciate an explanation right now. I-If it’s not too much to ask, that is.” ~

“You remember that one lesson Izanami and Shiro gave me about dimensions? It’s about that.”

~ “Holy shit.” ~

“Yeah. Just don’t stay up all night trying to puzzle that out, alright? Get some sleep, you’ll need it ‘cuz tomorrow’s gonna be a big day.”

~ “Er, sure. Thank you Ryuko.”~

“No problem, gnight. Love ya bud.”

~ “Thank you... you too,” ~ And with that Houka hung up. Ryuko put the phone down and turned back to Satsuki, who was smiling in an amused manner and running a finger across her cheek.

“What the hell did you do?” She asked softly.

Ryuko rubbed her forehead with her hand, “Oh my god. Never again will I travel between dimensions without sending, like, a fuckin’ legal notice to everyone I know first.”

Satsuki hum-chuckled, “You sounded so reassuring. Whatever you did must’ve really spooked ‘em.”

“I’m not surprised. Oh, uh, we maybe should expect someone else to call too. I dunno.”

“That’s alright. It’s nice to know they’re worried about us. Houka didn’t even seem that upset.”

Ryuko smiled, “He went through the trouble of hiding anything about us being... uh, you know what, didn’t he?”

“Indeed. Of course, it doesn’t matter how he feels about it, he would do that anyway. But now, if we can just convince our closest friends, we can finally behave as though we never even found out,” Satsuki said slyly.

The thought elated Ryuko, “That’s wonderful. I’m gonna go back to sleep now, yeah?” She held out her arms, and in real life moving into them was so easy, so natural. “You were shakin’ real bad again. Nightmare?”

Satsuki nodded into Ryuko’s shoulder as she pulled her even closer and rubbed her back.

“Just stay close, okay? I’ll protect you from ‘em,”

# Ring of Fire: Broken Strings

March 2067

~~~~~

~ “Hey.” ~

“Hey. Figured we’d hear from you,” Uzu was tense, pacing back and forth in the halls of the old government compound in New Jakarta they’d settled in as permanent base of operations. He’d been expecting this call from Ryuko, but it didn’t make knowing what to say any easier. Better off if she’d just kept her distance.

~ “So, you’ve heard.” ~ She sounded just as tense.

“Yeah. We all have.”

~ “... Well?” ~

“Well? What do you expect! What the hell? Why?” Uzu almost shouted.

~ “C’mon, whaddya mean why? You know why,” ~ Ryuko retorted, not frustrated but like she was explaining the obvious.

“... Yeah okay, maybe I do,” Uzu had watched the news footage of them together. The kiss in the ballroom, some sneaky long distance shots of them sitting by the beach, Ryuko feeding Satsuki a piece of sashimi. It was obvious how they felt about each other. And it was weirdly touching to see Satsuki smile like that. But still... “But still, how could you cheat on Rei? When has she ever, ever done anything to deserve it?”

~ “I know. I feel terrible. I don’t deserve any forgiveness for that, but it wasn’t... we didn’t cheat on her physically or anything. Just emotionally, I guess.” ~

“I don’t think that really makes it better.”

~ “Yeah I know that, that’s my point!” ~ Ryuko blurted, then sighed to calm down, ~ “Look, I’m not trying to make excuses or anything. I just wanted to call to see how everyone’s feeling.” ~

“Not too great, I’ll be honest. Aikuro’s off doing his own thing, Tsgumu’s been on the phone with his wife for an hour,” Very unlike him, they both knew that. “And you can hear this,” He turned the phone to speaker, and the noise of a piano being played at inhumanly fast speeds, occasionally punctuated by high pitched growls, was audible through the phone.

~ “Holy shit, is that Nonon?” ~

“She might never speak to Satsuki again, you know that?”

~ “Yeah, I’m sorry.” ~

“You know the kind of position that puts me in?”

~ “A real fucked up one.” ~

“Got that right. They’ve been best friends since they first learned to talk and now this is what’s gonna end it? *This*?” He scoffed, “It just – I don’t know – it shouldn’t be happening. It’s wrong.”

Uzu meant that more in the sense that it was unfathomable that he now lived in a world where the closest thing he had to a family was falling apart, but Ryuko didn’t pick that up. It was one thing to think to yourself that what you were doing was wrong, but to hear it said out loud... ~ “You’re right, of course,” ~ She said quickly, ~ “You know even Satsuki didn’t expect how much she’d freak.” ~

“Don’t try to make this her fault for overreacting.”

~ “I’m not! Geez! I was just trying to say we didn’t really have a plan or anything.” ~

“Really,” Uzu put his fingers to his chin thoughtfully. If Satsuki didn’t have a plan, then what did that mean? “Can I ask then, what is it you’re expecting? You really think ten years from now you’ll be married and everyone will be coming out to that lake house for barbecues, just one big happy family?”

~ “Honestly? That sounds wonderful.” ~ And that stopped Uzu short because, yeah, it didn’t sound half bad, and he could hear the longing in Ryuko’s voice. He didn’t need to be told how happy that would make her.

“And how do think that’s gonna happen?”

~ “That’s what I mean, we don’t know. That’s all I called to say. We know we fucked up, but this is what’s happening now. And just see what you thought of that.” ~

Uzu nodded. What *did* he think of that? He was pissed, and interested in figuring out at who. It wasn’t Nonon, obviously. And it wasn’t Satsuki, he didn’t buy Nonon’s hypothesis that she’d been tricked into this but he still just couldn’t be upset seeing her happy. But it couldn’t be Ryuko either, just from this conversation it was obvious this was really fucking her up – she’d already thought of every objection he’d voiced but was letting him make them anyway. Dammit, there wouldn’t even be a problem here if they weren’t sisters! All this trouble for that one simple fact! Finally he said, “I’ve got one more question. Does it matter at all to you that your sis-”

~ “- Don’t. Don’t finish that. Houka already wiped every mention of it from the internet.” ~

“He’s on board with this?”

~ “I don’t know, but it’s his job to take off things like that. So, it would be best for you if you just forgot you ever knew that, or at least pretended to. But for the record, yeah, it matters. This probably would’ve happen two years ago if not for that.” ~

“I see. I guess I appreciate that you’re honest about it, even if it’s long, long overdue. Just, let me say for the record too, I woulda been fine with you two if you’d just kept it quiet. But now I don’t know what to tell you. I need to think about this, see how it turns out.”

~ “Okay. I understand. I’m going to call the others now.” ~



“Yeah, you probably should. I guess I could call Rei for you, uh, if you wanted?” The moment that was out of his mouth, Uzu regretted it. What, get further drawn into this drama?

~ “Nah. I’m gonna have Houka do that, they’re closer. Well then, ah, good luck out there, both of you. And thanks for putting up with me. Alright, bye, I love you, bye.” ~

“Uh, thanks?”

The moment she hung up, those last words Ryuko had spoken rung around in Uzu’s head and finally set in. He gasped. That’s right, last night! What the hell was that about! No doubt about it, that feeling they’d felt from her last night was the very same one that “I love you” conjured up.

*[No doubt about it.]* Seijitsu confirmed his feelings, *[Something’s changed about her.]*

~~~~~

Nonon’s fingers wound up with some nasty looking scars on the tips where her berserk claws had erupted through them, but though very, very careful work by some of the best surgeons and physical therapists in the world the damage was rendered superficial. She could still play the piano, and thank God for that. In fact, while she was recovering from her other wounds it was about all she could do, and now that she was better, well, she’d already had her best piano flown down so why not spend all her spare time at it?

And that was what she was doing when Uzu stormed into her office. She’d taken the largest one, with a giant, curved window overlooking the city, and placed her sleek black grand piano right where the desk belonged. It sat on an imposing dais with raised steps, so even while playing she could overlook the city. The only lights in the room came from that window, the desk lamp clipped to her music stand, and Saiban.

She didn’t seem to notice Uzu, continuing to hammer away at the worn keys with unparalleled speed and precision. Saiban had even powered up so she could go even faster. Her hands were a blur, hitting keys in such rapid succession that even as she jumped between them she could return to the same one and make it sound like one continuous note. She was even using Saiban’s coattail as a third hand. Played like this one piano could do the work of a whole orchestra.

But it wouldn’t last. Nonon’s frustration seemed to be mounted, and she was constantly stopping and starting, scrawling notes across jumbled, incomprehensible pages of sheet music. Each time she would grumble, “No, that’s no good,” or “Wrong! Still off!” or “God fucking dammit!”. It didn’t seem like whatever musical dilemma she was having would resolve itself any time soon, but then abruptly she stood up with a short, furious little yell.

“Kid! Get another box of hammers and strings!” She shouted at Mataro, and he nodded and scurried out, grimacing and pulling at his collar as he passed Uzu. Uzu shrugged in nonverbal sympathy.

“What happened?” He asked Nonon, leaning over the piano as she busied herself gently removing each and every string from the interior of the piano.

“It overheated – strings are useless now. Hammers worn out too,” She informed him curtly but with workmanlike precision. “Gotta change ‘em.” Uzu took one and looked – sure enough, the metal wire was all bent and flattened, the little grooves in it smoothed out. The rest, Nonon set into a neat but distressingly large stack of other worn out strings.

“You can overheat a piano?”

“Yeah, *I* can,” Nonon declared, waving Mataro over. He had returned with a huge, heavy box about half his height, filled with tightly corded piano wire that unwound when Nonon removed it. As soon as he handed it over Nonon wordlessly dismissed him and he hurried out with some relief.

Even while furious, Nonon worked confidently to replace each individual string. Not much use knowing how to play an instrument if you didn’t also know how to care for it, she always said. Uzu picked through the piles of sheet music that were laying around everywhere, not especially eager to broach the topic of Ryuko and Satsuki, even though it had to be done. He didn’t get why Tsumugu was saying she let it get messy – the papers were all neatly stacked, weren’t they? Nonon just didn’t like throwing any half-finished drafts away lest she want to refer back to it.

But there was a sheet lying crumpled in the small trash can next to the piano bench. Nonon froze in the middle of her work when Uzu picked it up and unfurled it. *For Satsuki* the title read, and though Uzu couldn’t read music he could tell that the hand drawn notes on this draft made a song much less complex melody than the fast, technical melodies Nonon usually produced. *Well that’s on the nose*, he thought, almost amused, but it all but broke Seijistu’s heart.

“So, uh... Ryuko called just now.”

“You’ve gotta be shitting me. What, did she want to gloat?” Nonon said, trying to be nonchalant despite how clearly impossible that as

“No she – wait, why would she want to gloat?”

“Because she’s already won, dumbass! Have you looked outside?” Nonon gestured furiously to the window, and Uzu, still holding the wrinkled music, went over to look.

New Jakarta was the youngest, most advanced city in the country, located in east Borneo high above the encroaching waves, and brutal skyscrapers of blue steel and concrete towered almost like a little slice of Tokyo. It was the natural choice for the permanent base of operations, and from this vantage Nonon could see over the entire thing. Normal operations had long since ground to a halt, and like most other cities it had become something of a cross between military base and refugee camp. But all the bustling tents in the streets and the hollowed out storefronts hadn’t lead to chaos and crime, in fact they’d brought all the survivors together. A sense of everyone being in this together pervaded every moment of the day. And right now the mood was unusually jubilant, it looked like some kind of festival was happening.

The reason for that was found on the large screens mounted onto the sides of buildings, visible on every street across the city. Usually they were used for important announcements and news, but today all the news worth showing was nonstop coverage of yesterday’s events. Just a nonstop loop of Ryuko tearing the ceiling off the ballroom, sprouting diaphanous wings, pounding Godfrey into a bloody pulp, and then getting kissed by Satsuki. The crowd went wild every time.

“Get it now?” Nonon came to stand next to him, “The people love them, especially Ryuko. This is the fighting spirit we need to win. If I told the truth, and they all lost their faith in her, we wouldn’t last a week. We have to all present a united face to the world, that’s where our strength comes from. So there’s not a fucking thing I can do! Go ahead, tell her I’ll play along. Go on, now!”

“Hey, chill out! That’s not what I came in here for, holy shit!”

“*Chill out* ? I know you don’t give a fuck but holy shit can you at least *try* to act like a normal human being about this?” she rounded on Uzu with a chilling drop in his voice.

“Oh, and I bet you still think that’s because I think they’re hot together! How can you be so jealous over nothing at all? And what, I’m nuts for not wanting to abandon the closest thing to a family I’ve got? I’m nuts for *wanting* to be happy for them? Yeah this is all really fucked but I – I mean – what am I supposed to do? I don’t know I -,” Uzu realized that he’d gotten into an argument without meaning to, the last thing he or Nonon needed right now, “I’m sorry, nevermind. I’ll just go.”

Uzu turned to leave, but Nonon took his hand. Her face softened as she admitted to herself that maybe she wasn’t being fair to Uzu. Did she really think he was so stupid that leering at a couple of lesbians was how he made up his mind? Well, maybe a tiny bit. Mostly she was relieved to find that he understood her side of things better than she thought. Plus he looked cute when something shook his confidence, especially when that something was upsetting her. “What did you come in for?”

“I don’t know, I just knew you’d be upset and I thought you can’t be like that in battle,” They both knew that the time was closing in fast for a major confrontation. The obelisk REVOCS was building in the Sunda Straight was nearing completion – it would be the first one to be finished and it had to be destroyed before it could activate.

“Yeah I know that. Think it doesn’t bother me?”

“So, what can I do?”

“Hah! There’s nothing *to* do, that’s my point. They get to call all the shots, and we just have to smile and nod. Here, sit down, I wanna talk to you seriously,” Still holding his hand, she went back over to the piano bench and swung her legs into playing position. Uzu sat next to her and put an arm around her shoulder, “You know it’s just the way it is now, I used to not really understand exactly why we were fighting, but I believed in Satsuki *so hard*. And now I’m finally starting to get what the real point of what we’re doing is, but she might as well be a complete fucking stranger. I... honestly don’t think I’ve got any belief in either of them left,” She said sadly, “But you *can’t* tell anyone that, alright? I’m serious.”

Hearing that filled Uzu with despair, “Look, Nonon, be as mad at Ryuko as you want, I get that. But don’t hate Satsuki for this, please.”

*How are you still not getting this?* Nonon thought, annoyed. Then she took a deep breath, *No, it’s fine, just explain it to him like he’s five.* “Uzu, I can’t do that. Ryuko, I get why she seduced Satsuki -,”

“- You don’t still think Ragyo’s controlling her, right?”

“... No, I guess not. But Ryuko’s just pure instinct, all she thought was that she wanted to have sex with Satsuki, and so she seduced her.”

“... Right...”

“But Satsuki... I know better than anyone what she’s been through. This sort of degeneracy, that’s what the *enemy* does. I thought that was what she was trying to tell us, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t know about any of that. I just thought what mattered was that we were saving the world.”

Nonon shook her head, “But the reason *why* they were the ones trying to destroy the world is because they were the sorts of people who did what they wanted, no matter what. The sort of people who would only want to fuck someone *more* because they were family. I was sure that’s what Satsuki believed, that’s what made her better than all the other Kiryuins. Maybe she wanted to have sex with Ryuko too, but I thought that couldn’t possibly be stronger than not being like Ragyo. But turns out I have no idea what was going on inside her head. I don’t really know her at all, and I don’t know if I want to anymore.”

Uzu sat for a while, thinking. *Imagine at any point believing that I knew what Satsuki was thinking.* But then, Nonon had known her all their lives, had shaped her whole identity around being the only one at Honnouji who could get through to her. Maybe it made sense. He remembered what Ryuko had said, that this would all have happened years ago if they hadn’t found out they were sisters. Finally, he said, “Do you really not believe she might actually love Ryuko? Enough to go past even all that?”

Nonon got what he meant. If Satsuki really so passionately in love with Ryuko that it overwhelmed her morals, then Nonon’s view of what those morals were might still be right. But... “For Ryuko?” Nonon chuckled, “*Ryuko’s* really Satsuki’s perfect woman, you think? I mean, if it was someone who could, like, actually understand Satsuki and keep up with her I’m not sure, but I don’t buy it.”

“... You really hate her now, don’t you?” Uzu seemed shocked, and Nonon suddenly found herself faced with the question. She thought of last night, of that feeling of unconditional love. It wasn’t just some sort of residual aftershock, runoff from whatever she happened to be feeling at the moment. It was directed, it was *for* Saiban and her.

“You should go get ready for the mission briefing,” She finally said, “I’ll be there in a second, I just need to finish fixing the piano.”

Uzu nodded, gave her a quick kiss as he stood up to go. “I’m glad you’re not angry at me anymore, because I have to say I think you’re wrong. You do know Satsuki, and she is in love with Ryuko. If that’s a good or bad thing, I don’t know, but it’s what I believe anyway.”

On the way out he smoothed the crumpled sheet music he’d been holding and left it on one of the stacks. It bored into her eyes every time she looked up from the piano until she couldn’t take it anymore and tucked it into the middle of the pile.

# A Matter of Perspective: 1

## Chapter Summary

This will be (hopefully) only two parts long. Ryuko gets into the lab and tries to make sense of her recent experiences in an expositiony type way. With added Mako so it's not too boring I hope.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March 2067

~~~~~

“I *knew* it!” Mako was flushed with triumph as she scurried to greet Ryuko and Satsuki. When she’d heard the news about yesterday she knew it was time to take a break from school and pay her bestie a visit. Especially when she heard the guys were gonna run some experiments on her – Mako didn’t know that this wasn’t like the last time, that Ryuko was actually looking forward to it.

“You didn’t know anything Mako,” Ryuko chuckled as Mako leapt onto her, her shoes making a clatter on the marble floor of Research Complex’s lobby.

“Nuh-uh! I *totally* saw this coming! Ahh! Satsuki! Congratulations, I’m so happy!” Now it was Satsuki’s turn, and she too couldn’t help but smile. It was a happy surprise that the first person they’d encountered since their return to Japan was a friendly face.

“Thank you Mako. Your enthusiasm is... unexpected but not unwelcome,” Satsuki said graciously, ruffling Mako’s hair.

“Well duh! Ryuko’s only been waiting for this day for years – er, eep!” Mako threw her hands over her mouth frantically, unsure if she’d said too much.

But Satsuki looked over at Ryuko with a soft smile, and Ryuko felt like her heart could burst. This was so perfect! Who cared what anyone else thought if they had Mako? Mako watched the look between them with mounting glee until Satsuki said, “Oh, has she now?”

Mako gasped loudly. “Hold hands!” She commanded them.

“Wha-I-don’t you think it’s a little soon?” Ryuko was surprised by her intensity.

“No way, it’s been months since your last girlfriend, don’t let that get in the way! C’mon, I need to see what you look like together!”

“Oh hell, fine,” Ryuko grumbled and quickly took Satsuki’s hand. She could practically see the electricity jolt through her girlfriend. *My girlfriend, holy shit !*

“Oh. My. God. *So cute!*” Mako was ecstatic, even more so when Satsuki blushed and looked bashful and in response Ryuko just grinned and squeezed even harder. “Just like I thought, it’s a perfect fit! So glamorous!”

Ryuko waved her free hand dismissively, “Glamorous? I mean, thanks, but I don’t think-”

“-Trust me, next time one of you has to do a speech we’ll get both of you on stage and the crowd’ll go *wild!* Whaddya think Satsuki?”

Satsuki had by now recovered her composure. It was interesting how Mako’s new talent manager mentality was impacting her – to her, amazing things had to be shared. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

“I’m not sure you’ve got a choice! Did any reporters catch up with you yet?”

“They haven’t had a chance. We basically just got off the plane,” Satsuki said.

“Whaaaaat! You must be exhausted! C’mon, let’s have a snack before you go get science done on ya, eh?”

But Ryuko shook her head, “You guys go ahead, I’m ready to start.”

“You-really?”

“Yeah, I’m actually kinda looking forward to it this time.”

~~~~~

Test One:

“Okay, there has got to be a better way than this,” Ryuko said as she examined the gun Shiro had just handed her. A full clip of starching rounds, but this was all of them – if she somehow wasted them all they’d have to wait a few hours for Izanami to machine some more.

“Well, do you know one?” Shiro replied offhand, preoccupied with setting up the sensors around her. She would sit in a small chamber with a glass window and bright floodlights illuminating her from every side, with slick curved walls containing gravimeters, CAT scanners, and other sensors that would detect even the most minute changes. Next to it was the observation room, closed to everyone but Houka, Shiro, Satsuki, and Mako (and Izanami and Misaki, but then that went without saying).

“Good point,” Ryuko shrugged. While she waited she practiced aiming the gun – she’d gone to a shooting range with Aikuro a while back and the muscle memory was still there.

Satsuki frowned, “I think I’ll sit this one out.”

Everyone nodded – wasn’t hard to see she why. When she’d left the room, Houka continued, “Regardless of whether another method exists, we’d like to start with replicating what you described. Specifically.”

“I get that, still, I’d love to have a way to disconnect myself without blowing my brains out.”

Mako’s head jerked up from her snack, “Wait-who?”

Ryuko looked at her apologetically, “Yeah, this is what’s happening. Sorry, I know it’s freaky, but I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

When Houka and Shiro nodded Mako’s face froze, and she said, “Okay! I’ve changed my mind! I’m gonna wait with Satsuki in the hall bye!” And she bustled out, not forgetting her box of crackers on the way.

“No matter, no matter” Shiro was as excited as Ryuko had ever seen him, not that it was much but you could see the intensity burning under his outer calm. He’d been like that since Ryuko had started telling her story – no, since she’d first arrived. Houka too. They hurried through the rest of the preparations until Shiro finally said, “Well, whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay,” Ryuko sat up in her chair and prepared to fire, “Hey, listen, about me and Satsuki-”

“Ohoho spare us, please,” Houka laughed.

“Yes, believe me compared to witnessing the first – well, second technically – but the first *intentional* travel between dimensions... let’s just say you can run your personal life however you wish, as far as we’re concerned.”

“Seriously? Izanami, Misaki, you guys’re on board with this?”

~[*I helped clean up your mess, what do you think?*]~ Misaki responded.

~[*Yup!*]~ Izanami agreed, ~[*I wasn’t gonna let you off the hook for Rei, but after last night who care’s about all that?*]~

“Fair enough,” Ryuko smiled. Well this was going better than expected. “In that case, I won’t keep you waiting any longer. I’m off to see Senketsu!”

Ryuko put the gun to her temple, pulled the trigger without sparing a thought for what that would do to a human. The **CLAP!** of its discharge was louder than she expected. Doubly so because she could feel quite clearly and painlessly her skull shatter, the grey matter of her brain part around the metal tip, the life-fibers in the bullet disappear into her own, the other side of her skull shattering, and then the whole thing sealing up as if it had never happened. The bullet had sailed through her head harmlessly, and as her scientist friends’ faces dropped in disappointment panic rose in her. *Oh no, am I not gonna be able to get back?*

“... Huh,” Shiro finally broke the silence.

“I don’t know what happened!” Ryuko blurted, “It hit my brain, you saw it?”

“Well, there are several variables we haven’t accounted for. Maybe we should have expected this. Perhaps it requires that she also be injected with the serum?”

More panic, “No, no I don’t want that!”

“Well, it’s possible. Don’t worry, we have the antidote,” Shiro reached to his side as Izanami produced a syringe of the very same stuff from a vent in his desk.

“Hold on,” Houka reached over and lowered his hand, “Before we waste any of that stuff, maybe we should consider that it’s a specific part of the brain that must be destroyed.”

“Could be just as easily as anything else,” Shiro allowed.

“Yes, that must be it!” Ryuko said.

Shiro scratched his forehead, “Alright then... try the brainstem.”

“Sure! ... Er, where?”

“Press the barrel right where your skull connects to the back of your neck.”

“Got it!”

While Ryuko tried to get the angle right, Houka asked, “Why there?”

“The core, more primitive part of the brain? Shared between all vertebrates, no matter how simple? It’s as good a place to start as any.”

“Alright, ready!” Ryuko announced.

This time was nothing like the first. But exactly how Ryuko remembered. The last thought Ryuko’s waking mind had before it unfolded was that she’d have to ask them what this looked like in their perspective.

~~~~~

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

*You’re back.* Senketsu noted as Ryuko adjusted to once again having her perception freed from that fragile little human form. It was as straightforward as that, she was back, and compared to the first time the initial shock was so miniscule it might as well have never happened. Back to the Earth with its jumbled, multidimensional chaos of continents and oceans and clouds, the distant sun pulsating, the stars yet further away and the living network of life-fibers that connected them. And behind that the wall, the living god that was beyond Ryuko’s power to comprehend, looming with far-away menace like storm-clouds on a distant horizon.

Yeah, it was remarkable how quickly she’d acclimated to it. Stretching out to her full extent went from horrifying to natural the moment she decided to do so voluntarily. Well, part of her was still horrified, it was more that the scale was tipped and the majority of her divergent trains of thought were comfortable instead of driven insane by the unspeakable chaos of it all.

*I came as soon as I could!* Ryuko had instructions to reconnect as soon as possible, but she couldn’t help herself. She was instantly distracted by the joy of being reunited with Senketsu once again.  
*You waited for me!*

*Did I not say that I would remain in Earth’s orbit now that you have gained the ability to travel here?*

*I guess I just expected that you’d be out... exploring? Yes, exploring. That’s what you were doing before, wasn’t it?*

*I have done quite a bit of exploring, yes. But now that you are here, I’m content to wait nearby.*



*So that you'll always be ready whenever I want to see you?* Ryuko was, obviously, touched. If she were incapable of returning to her body of course the first thing she'd want to do was see what else was out there. Hell, if she were someone like Houka or Shiro she might do it anyway. She realized quite abruptly that if there was a way for her to more easily free herself from her body she must never teach it to them, or more accurately their kamui. In their thirst for knowledge they'd likely be lost for good.

*Oh, you're already conducting experiments, aren't you?* Senketsu detected the thought on the surface of her mind. *No, the reason I'll stay here is so I can mask your presence with Shinra-koketsu.*

*Mask my presence?*

*You see, because I have not fully mastered Shinra-koketsu, from long distances its signal seems to be similar to the rest of the life-fibers. It is large enough that I can mask your signal so long as we both stay near each other.*

Ryuko wasn't planning on straying far, that was for sure. *You mean if they spot me, they'll try to destroy me?* They weren't nearly powerful enough to resist if even a small fraction of the life-fiber network peeled off and refocused on Earth. Or if the one they served became interested...

*I have no idea. But in my thousands of light-years of travel I have not seen anything like us anywhere. It's possible that something might come simply to investigate, but that would not be the end of it. So please don't do anything reckless like attack them directly – ah, nevermind. I see that you understand.*

Ryuko understood, of course. This was the big time. Like way back when she'd gone berserk and the destructive power she wielded finally sunk in, and she understood that it wasn't just herself on the line. No rushing headlong into things anymore. The whole world was counting on her. *What a fascinating thing Senketsu has discovered. The guys'll lose their shit – uh-oh.*

Ryuko had dallied longer than she'd planned. *I told them I'd come back right away!*

*I don't think you'll have anything to worry about.* Senketsu was calm as Ryuko turned her attention back to her body. Right away, Ryuko had agreed, and that was what she found. A fountain of blood was spurting from her body's skull, the bullet was still somewhere within, inching forward glacially. The bullet casing was still in the chamber. The muzzle flash hadn't even dissipated.

*Whoa.* Ryuko was mesmerized.

*In this form you perceive events as fast as thought. I'd say you haven't wasted too much time yet, have you?"*

*No... Actually if anything it might be too soon. I've gotta make sure they get good measurements, this might be too fast.*

*I agree.* So, if there wasn't any particular rush, why not stay a while. Ryuko told Senketsu everything that had happened since yesterday, not much compared to last time they caught up, but all things considered a busy day. Well, told would imply a spoken dialogue, which wouldn't be accurate. Just like back on Earth they could share memories, perhaps even easier now than before. Like a movie with commentary that could be watched in any order, sometimes on multiple reels at once.

Ryuko imagined them sitting just as they had on the deck of the *Naked Sol*, conversing late into the night on the eve of the final battle. She could see it like it was real - a new flesh and blood body for herself, a new sailor uniform body for Senketsu, the rest of her true form craning around them like an endlessly tall living cathedral, the sky above blotted out by Senketsu's kaleidoscopic wings. It felt so real, this vision, that Ryuko swore she could lift this puppet body's hands. She leapt to her feet, put her hands to the ground – her own self. It felt like warm, smooth stone.

“Senketsu, explain,” She forced herself to say it within the imagined form, just to see if she could.

*You are the master within yourself. And much greater than you were. Is it any wonder that your imagination has become more capable of resembling reality.*

“So this is all just... like lucid dreaming?” She touched her face. Yeah, that felt like skin alright.

*You understand quickly, Senketsu was entertained to watch her learn all this. It felt like it took an eternity for him to figure it out, but time wasn't so easily pinned down here. You see now why I'm quite comfortable waiting for you. Sometime, I will show you everything I've dreamed up to entertain myself.*

Ryuko could have squealed with excitement. Actually, her imagined self did. This was beyond anything she could have imagined! Just as she'd expected, this was the true shape of things, life as she'd known it was only a minute fraction and it would take all of time to see everything.

Which only reminded her that she did have all the time she needed for this. But there were other things that needed to be done first. She wasn't sure how long it had been before she admitted it, but finally it was time.

~~~~~

March 2067

~~~~~

“Gya-hahaha!” Ryuko gasped as a jolt of something close to actual pain flashed through her face. She hadn't thought a lot about where she angled the gun, so naturally putting it to the back of her neck (which had required a good deal of flexibility) meant the exit wound would be right through her cheekbone. But it sealed up like it had never happened, except for the blood sprayed around the text chamber and the bullet that had just lodged into a very expensive gravimeter in the wall.

“Ryuko!” Houka shouted, “D-did it work?” Ryuko had chosen to return after the bullet had left the other side of her head and was about to hit the wall, and from Houka's perspective he couldn't be quite sure if she'd really left.

“Oho yeah!”

“Take a look,” Shiro showed him a screen. His eyes went wide – Misaki's too. Shiro was practically drooling.

“... My God... Misaki felt a disturbance, but I could never have imagined...”

“... This is... she really did it...”

Ryuko felt so smug she was almost embarrassed. Proud too, she'd just given them a gift they could never thank her for. And they were just getting started.

"So, what do you want to see next?"

~~~~~

When the other scientists working in the Xenobiology Department heard that Ryuko was being experimented on they were naturally quite excited. And just as naturally disappointed to hear that it would be closed to everyone except the inner circle. So Satsuki wasn't surprised to see that there was a fairly large crowd in the hall outside just hoping for a hint about what was going on inside.

They snapped to attention when Satsuki exited the room. Moments later, Mako followed to much less fanfare.

"Oh hey Satsuki! I – whoa what's going on out here!" She cut herself off.

Satsuki addressed the assembled scientists, "Could you give us a moment, please? Go wait in the mess hall."

Some of them had seen Satsuki before, but not one had seen her *smile*. How shocking! And considering the morning's news, they all knew quite well what she was smiling about. She seemed completely different to them, extrapolating ever greater drama from that news. Like Ryuko was already rubbing off on her. So of course they were happy not to obey but to oblige her request.

When they were gone Satsuki shook her head, "They wouldn't understand that Ryuko wouldn't want any strangers present for this."

"You can't blame them for being excited though, right?"

"... Mako, what exactly has Ryuko told you about what we're experimenting on today?"

"Nothing," Mako shrugged. "But I saw it on the news."

"That doesn't begin to cover it."

"I know! But whatevs. All I need to know is that Ryuko did something else amazing yesterday. Because she's amazing."

"Hmm, you're right about that," Satsuki said.

Mako ate her crackers quietly for a moment while Satsuki leaned against the wall opposite her, but eventually couldn't resist speaking, "You know, I always knew this day would come."

"Hmm?"

"Y'know, with you and Ryuko. She told me it would never happen, no way. But I could tell nobody else would do for you."

Satsuki was surprised, and it showed. Mako had got that from reading her? No, no way. "I doubt that very much."

Mako looked hurt, but then laughed and said, “Gosh I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say it like that! I just meant there was nobody else in the world that you care for so much, especially no girls.”

Satsuki sighed and relented, “No, you were right. I suppose I didn’t want to admit it to myself,” She said slowly, mind wandering. *All that wasted time. If she could figure me out so easily what was the point of hiding?*

“Dya not want to talk about this right now?”

“No, I do! I do but... this is all still new to me,” *That, and I never expected to be having this conversation with you. But then who better, really?*

“Well, what’s on your mind?”

“I suppose what I want to know is what makes you so accepting of us. Not that I’m surprised, but you should know by now that this has caused problems amongst our friends.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sorry about Nonon, by the way. You’ll make up one day though, I bet.”

“Thank you,” If Mako’s other predictions had come true eventually, that gave Satsuki some hope.

“Have you spoken to Ira about it.”

“Nah, we’ve been too busy today!”

“I see. But you understand though, why the others might not be quite so happy for us.” Mako nodded. “But that doesn’t matter to you?”

“Of course not. I’m always in Ryuko’s circle, no matter what. Whatever’s gonna make her happy, I support it, and she does the same for me.”

“And what about Rei? She couldn’t have made Ryuko happy?”

“Oh, they were cute together and we all had fun and all. But they weren’t a forever thing. Sometimes people have those, it’s okay.”

“I don’t think Rei agrees with you on that.”

“Well I dunno, it’s just a feeling I had.”

“But you don’t feel bad for her?”

“Sure I do! I know what someone who’s heartbroken looks like! But she won’t stay that way forever.”

*She’s starting to sound like she’s got this deep well of common sense she almost doesn’t even know she has. I wonder, it must be her mother rubbing off on her as she gets older.* “So you’re in Ryuko’s circle even when she does things no normal person would ever do, and hurts people she says she loves.”

“That’s not what happened!”

“It’s one way to describe what happened. If something like this happened to you, would you do the same?”

It was like Satsuki had tried to feed Mako a live spider, watching her imagine a situation in which she felt herself compelled to end things with Ira for... Mataro – *god no* , how *dare* Satsuki even put something like that in her head , even for a millisecond! “That wasn’t very nice!” she whined after she recovered from nearly choking on crackers.

“You hadn’t thought about it like that, had you?”

“No!”

“So?”

“So what?” Mako had recovered from her shock and was now back to normal, “I’m still happy for Ryuko. And you. Doesn’t matter.”

This was going in circles, “But why Mako? Help me understand it.”

“Why? I don’t need to know why. Ryuko doesn’t have to explain herself to me.”

“Okay. But why that? I know everything you’ve been through together but what made you decide she was worthy of that?”

Mako seemed confused, “Because I love her. Satsuki, I don’t get it. Why are you asking me this?”

“Because I’m trying to understand what the difference is between you and my former elites. What you and Ryuko have is what I want to have with them,” *What I thought I had with them*, “But now – maybe Houka aside, he seems not to care – I’m in danger of losing them. What do you think it is, Mako?”

That almost stumped Mako. “Hmmm...” She murmured for a while. But finally she asked, “Well, when have they ever seen you do the wrong thing before?”

“All the time, I can assure you I’ve made a multitude of terrible mistakes in front of them.”

“No, that’s not the same thing. Mistakes aren’t the same as doing the wrong thing.”

It dawned on Satsuki what Mako meant, “Oh.”

“Ryuko can be a big dummy, I know that. Can they say the same?”

Satsuki didn’t get a chance to answer because Shiro flung the door open, grinning. *Grinning*. “We got it. We got it! We got it we got it we got it!”

“Yaaaay!” Mako jumped for joy and hurried back into the testing room, still not at all aware of what was going on.

But Satsuki now had to admit that maybe there was a method to her madness.

You have free reign to nag me if I don't finish the follow-up to this one in the next couple days, I really have no excuse this time.

Also side note, for some reason since I switched word processors recently every so often spaces get added in the middle of words when I post to AO3. No idea why that's happening but when you see that it isn't intentional. If anyone has any advice let me know because I keep missing them trying to edit manually.

## A Matter of Perspective: 2

### Chapter Summary

Some more explaining? TBH I'm not that happy with parts of this one, but that isn't the case with the last half or so, I like that. Featuring Ira and getting into some more of my interpretation of Shiro.

I think there's one extra chapter in here and then we go back to wrap up the "Ring of Fire" set with a big set piece battle. That one might take me a while.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March 2067

~~~~~

Test two:

“So this is it, huh? It’s even more impressive in person,” Shiro said giddily as he watched Ryuko manifest the wings which before now he’d only seen on video, effortlessly squeezing a medicine ball they’d put in the test chamber using an extended filament from the edge of her finger. While she had all this extended from herself, it was hard not to channel a great deal of her power, and so her hair glowed like the sun even while she sat quite nonchalantly in the test chamber.

“Oohhh!” Mako made a loud appreciative noise and clapped. Satsuki basked in the warm crimson glow with a small smile

“Fascinating, Misaki has confirmed, those structures are indeed composed of your own reservoir of life-fibers. She’s saving the data now. It appears from your energy signal that what you have gained is not an increase in raw power but greater *control*.”

“Which, as you already know, has lead to even greater increase in combat ability,” Shiro added.

“Can you move them?” Houka asked.

“Of course,” Ryuko flicked her wings demonstratively. It wasn’t at all hard to do so, it came instinctively. “It’s the same as this,” She lifted the medicine ball, keeping the life-fiber thread that held it straight and rotating it about her finger like a pendulum.

“So just as the Kamui can call life-fibers to them in order to absorb them, once they are part of you they can be moved, but in a much greater variety of directions. Yes, we’ve seen both Ragyo and Nui use this ability before.”

“To mind stitch people. Which I’m not gonna even try and figure out how to do.”

“Naturally, naturally,” Shiro brushed past it. They’d revisit that at later date, for purely scientific purposes, “And what about changes to shape? Can you alter the form of your life-fiber projections?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess,” Again, it wasn’t especially hard to figure out how. She bent the threads of her wings, stretched them out until their edges connected, contracted them into thin spikes, broadened their tips into wide shapes like battle-axes. The change was smooth, lightning fast “Cooooool...”

Shiro chuckled. Ryuko had up until this point tried to act unimpressed by her capabilities. “I didn’t expect it would be so easy.”

“I am the master within myself,” Ryuko shrugged

Hmm. Well, if the kamui can change their physical shape, why can’t you? Even your flesh has been seen to undergo great change during your berserk incident, hasn’t it? I wonder if you could recreate that?”

“I don’t know,” Ryuko tapped her chin thoughtfully.

“... Well?”

“What?”

“Could you... try to do that?”

“I don’t think so! I-I mean, I don’t even know how!” Ryuko said defensively. Shiro seemed taken aback.

He frowned, “I assumed it would be quite similar.”

“No, I don’t think it is. I mean maybe I can, but I wouldn’t even know where to begin. It’s like how can I try to make my body do something I can’t even imagine doing?” Truthfully the idea kind of spooked Ryuko. Change herself? Into what? In the past, as a teenager, there were definitely times when she wished for things to be done to herself. Sometimes a face more delicate, girly, whatever it was that made it hard to fit into the girls’ cliques in high school. Sometimes a figure less full than hers, more easily concealed in baggy clothes – so boys would go back to treating her like one of them instead of suddenly being aware of this difference between them. But those were desires she only remembered as foolish. Ryuko hadn’t even realized it but she *liked* the way she looked now, and it felt kind of nice to realize that. Or maybe he was thinking more of the way Nui had once changed her form to resemble a boy named Shinjiro Nagita. But such deceptive tactics made Ryuko’s skin crawl too. If the ability to do that was widespread, who could people trust? Not even their own families. “Let’s maybe come back to that later.”

“And what about the pattern on your projections? Is there any significance to that?” Houka asked.

Those patterns were radial, concentric wheeling lights that permeated through the fibrous structure of each projected wing like honeycomb. At the center, about halfway across the length of each wing, the cores resembled slowly rotating wheels. Or gears. Or if you squinted, eyes. They made Ryuko feel comfortable, she’d seen them before. “Yeah. These are, like, my pattern. Sort of like my fingerprint. I guess I could shift it, but I feel like it’d just go back if I let them.”



“No need. We have *plenty* of data already.”

“Indeed,” Shiro agreed, “I feel confident in saying based just on this cursory analysis that your ability to travel between dimensions has unlocked a far greater understanding of your own capabilities than you had before. I believe that, finally, your strength is equal or greater to that which Ragyo possessed in her prime. Definitely worthy of considering a new form. With your permission, I’d like to christen it:”

### ~RYUKO KISARAGI~

~~~~~

Test three:

Experimenting on the “eye” phenomenon Ryuko had created the day before wound up taking a good deal longer. Satsuki – being the one who’d actually seen this happen before – had to be in the room for this one, but since she obviously wasn’t interested in seeing Ryuko get hurt they had to close the window to her test chamber and pull up another one from storage within which to manifest “the eye”.

But it did work, although they had no idea how much effort Ryuko expended on the other side almost the moment she disconnected the luminous blue sheet of light appeared. Just as it had before, it filled all available space and seemingly consumed all light in the room except that which it produced, shorting out all the computers so that after it disappeared they all displayed error messages. In the briefest moment that it existed it darted back and forth, focussing on everyone in the room (including the kamui) in turn, but it happened so fast that they all had the impression that Ryuko had been looking directly at them.

~ *[It’s a lucky thing we were here!]* ~ Izanami said, ~ *[The mechanical sensors have been fried, but Misaki and I caught the whole thing!]* ~

Satsuki nodded as it disappeared, “Yes, that is exactly how it was. Now you see what your security cameras could not – oh! Mako!”

Mako was sitting straight up in her chair, eyes wide, hand on her heart. “T-that. That was Ryuko, wasn’t it?”

Satsuki and Shiro crowded around her, and he said, “Perhaps we could have warned you. Are you comfortable being here if we continue?”

“This feeling... it’s like when you told me to shove Senketsu into Ryuko to free her and... I don’t really know what happened. I’m not sure, but I must’ve gone wherever Ryuko is now, didn’t I?”

Houka and Shiro shared a look. “We’re gonna need to have a talk with you about that someti-”

“Hey, I’m back!” Ryuko interrupted through the metal sheet over her window.

That snapped Mako out of it instantly, “Ohthankgod! Ryuko you scared me!”

“Is... everything alright?”

“Yes, we’re fine,” Shiro said, “Please prepare to run the next test.”

“Whaaaa!” Mako shouted.

She ended up having to stay in the hall again.

Subsequent runs involved Ryuko manifesting “the eye” at different angles and different sizes, or even attempting to push another part of her larger being into a space they could perceive to slowly piece together an image of her true self using little 3d slices. That didn’t always work, but they were dedicated to trying. Izanami even hauled out an old film camera and after coordinating with Ryuko for the manifestation to occur with the camera’s timer they managed to photograph it despite how defiantly it continued to short out all electronics in the immediate area.

The last test was one of duration. Previously Ryuko had only manifested “the eye” for instantaneous moments, but now they set a timer for five entire seconds. Was it remarkable that she managed it? They had no frame of reference for knowing. But when the window to her test chamber opened again (it was a lot bloodier than last they’d checked and quite a few valuable instruments had been broken by bullets) Ryuko looked bored to tears.

“Ughhh that took forever! *Never* doing that again, holy shit.”

“Time moves a great deal faster when you are in a higher dimensional state, doesn’t it?”

“As fast as I can think – but hey, about that name, I don’t wanna say ‘higher dimensional whatever’ every time I talk about this. I’ve been thinking we need something simpler.”

“But that’s the accurate term,” Houka said.

“Yeah well nobody’s going to know what the fuck it means. I think we should just say something people will get like... I dunno, the spirit world, or something.”

Shiro shook his head and spat, “That would be beyond misleading. No.”

“Well I dunno, when Satsuki first told me about Ragyo surviving she said it was her soul that survived. That’s not what it is, but it’s close enough. I think that’s what I’m gonna do,” What Ryuko didn’t tell them, what Ryuko didn’t know how to tell them yet, was that she did already use the word “soul” or “spirit” in her own mind. She’d seen that some part of people that made them who they were was what the life-fibers were harvesting from humanity. That it was food, no, *fuel* for the things that were behind them. And that even now that they were free from the life-fibers snare, that part of them would just wind up dissipating back into the Earth – something she thought was natural and even quite beautiful, but wasn’t sure how they’d take it. Had she been granted the keys to witness the afterlife, in exchange for never truly experiencing it? She had no idea, but the name fit far better than she was ready to explain to them. Especially not with Satsuki here, the others were likely so atheistic they would just see it as more science to be done, but she believed there was something out there. How could Ryuko tell her that she knew what that something else was?

“Please, don’t go around saying that. This is science, we can’t have people ascribing spiritual significance to our findings. That sort of language, it’s not too far from what REVOCS using, you realize. Do you think their beliefs are at all accurate?”

“Look, I know what this shit is, alright? Better than you. But I’m gonna be going back there every damn day if I can, just to see Senketsu, and if every time I do it I have to tell people ‘don’t mind me

I'm just perceiving the fourth dimension for a bit" I'm gonna lose my mind. 'Spirit world' is a hell of a lot simpler, and I could come up with something *way* more misleading, don't tempt me."

Shiro sighed, "Fine, fine. Do what you want. Just don't come crying to me when you can't get away from all your cultists asking you what you meant by that."

He proceeded to start logging more data, and Satsuki said, "You know it's strange, I didn't feel that same sensation that came along with the first time. Sort of like an adrenaline rush? Why not I wonder?"

"Oh!" Ryuko was quick to answer, "That's cuz I didn't try to actually interact with you guys. That's what happens when I like reach out to touch you *in the spirit world*," She said the last part pointedly.

"I see," Satsuki nodded, then checked her watch, "It's a good thing I cleared my schedule. I assume that's what you'd like to test next?"

"Precisely. That's one effect we'd most *certainly* like to test. This has been interesting though, it does come with significant downsides, but I suppose I can see that it's useful for you to be able to see into our world from time to time."

"Huh? No, I don't need to use this for that, I can see over just fine."

Shiro seemed excited by that, "Really? Well that's excellent! You should be able to follow the enemy back to their hidden bases without any trouble at all!"

"Follow them back? Oh, that would take so long!"

"What, less than a day from their base to Japan, by stealth plane."

"... Do you have any idea how long a whole day is over there?"

"Let me make sure I'm understand you correctly here. There is no practical reason why you cannot remain there for long enough to observe any events that might be tactically important? Just... boredom? And this effect we've been experimenting on has no relation to that, really it's just a novelty?" Shiro's tone wasn't accusatory, these things might have been frustrating to him but not enough to dampen his current mood. He just wanted to get this down for the record.

"I don't think it's a novelty," Houka said defensively, "This will go a long way in our understanding of how the dimensions interact."

"Yeah! I think it's pretty neat. And trust me, in my shoes you'd get pretty bored too trying to wait a whole day."

Shiro snorted, "For that tactical advantage? I highly doubt it."

"Oh, but Shiro that's why Ryuko's the perfect one to have this ability," Satsuki said with a smile, "If I'm understanding correctly, Ryuko *could* have something nearing omniscience. Can you imagine what a danger that would be to the world in the wrong hands? But if she'll get bored before she can even use it, I can't think of anyone better to entrust such power to."

Ryuko flashed a toothy smile back at Satsuki. She, at least, got it.

~~~~~  
Test four:

“Empowerment” was what they ended up calling it. At least, when she tried it on kamui. This time, she was able to pick up which of her slumbering children were Izanami and Misaki by finding Houka and Shiro and following the connection over to them. Just as she thought, recreating the exact circumstances of the previous night was no trouble, but what she didn’t realize was that doing so gave both the kamui a significant, albeit temporary, power boost. Now that Shiro was excited about, that could prove very useful.

But when she attempted it on Satsuki again, the results were less resounding. Sure, she felt a brief rush of exhilaration, but it was like an immaterial hand was grabbing her heart and squeezing it faster than it was meant to go. It hurt, *a lot*. So Ryuko learned the lesson that she shouldn’t do that to humans again, only kamui.

Another lesson she learned was that just as those she was empowering could detect something of her feelings, the same went in reverse. She could already sense the general mood of kamui from their aura, but now she could even tell just a bit of what their human counterparts were feeling too. She could sense the consuming fervor with which they worked.

They were the same, but also different, Ryuko was beginning to understand. The same tireless work ethic and the same glint in their eyes, but underneath their passions burnt in ways that weren’t quite identical.

Houka, he sought knowledge simply because he couldn’t help himself. He was doing it to answer those questions that rattled in his brain, to challenge himself. Misaki agreed with him on that. She saw each new mystery as a puzzle which she approached methodically, cautiously. They watched Ryuko’s miracles with glee as new revelations brought fun and satisfaction.

But Shiro, he watched with the salivating intensity of a gambler who was winning the biggest bet of his life. Oh how quickly annoyance could flair! Could you blame him? And Izanami, oh, she certainly was sweeter and more sensitive than he, but her aims were the same. Ryuko was to them a gateway, a solution to all of... well, life.

It was them that she needed to watch out for. Houka and Misaki knew caution where they did not. They would push the envelope, constantly, because that was the only way to get what they truly wanted – what Ryuko already had, but for everyone.

Was that useful? Inspiring? Dangerous? Ryuko wasn’t sure.

~~~~~

At this point it was nearing dinnertime, and aside from Ryuko everyone was too hungry to go on, at least not now. There was one final thing Ryuko wanted to experiment on – that strange moment when she’d awoken *before* she was shot – she was convinced that she’d somehow traveled through time, but nobody else thought that was possible. So that would have to wait, especially since Shiro and Houka had to write a report on the “empowerment” episode of the previous night to explain to everyone. But before she and Satsuki left (together, of course), she did talk the others into lending her the starching round gun plus a silencer, in case she wanted to use it again. She didn’t really plan on it, just because cleaning up the blood would be a mess, but she also knew the urge to talk to Senketsu again might be unbearable. And in addition to that, she also left with a bracer of epipens

with the antidote to the life-fiber inhibiting serum. Now that she'd fallen for that trap once, she had no intention of letting it get her ever again.

Ira came by to pick Mako up as well, and Houka went up with her. The sun was going down as they met by the roundabout in front of the research complex – it was nearly empty, most of the workers had already gone home. Houka would normally not even venture out at this time, but he needed to speak with Ira about another matter of great importance.

“Mako, if you wouldn't mind please wait out her for a moment,” Houka said as he stepped into the passenger seat of Ira's car. It wasn't the same convertible he'd had, but rather a new electric sports car with a gigantic engine block. And a roof, which was the important thing.

“Well, now that we have some privacy, I need to find out where you stand on -,”

Ira held up a hand, “Satsuki and Ryuko, I know. I should have guessed you'd be the one tasked with making sure the truth never got out. Did you talk to Rei?”

“This morning,” Houka sighed, rubbing his face, “Oh, Tsumugu's wife is looking after her. It is *not* pretty.”

“You don't seem particularly thrilled about it, either.”

“For the moment I simply need to make sure, as you said, the truth doesn't become a problem. You can understand the severity of the situation.”

Ira nodded, “Well, you don't have to worry about us. I'm going to let her have this.”

Houka's eyebrows jumped and he pushed his glasses up while Tekketsu informed Misaki [*He speaks for both of us. We're of one mind on this.*]

“Did Mako talk to you?” Houka finally asked.

“No, and if you'd asked me earlier today we might have had a different response. But we've done a lot of thinking, a lot of discussing. We will not try to reveal the truth, nor do we have any intention of making things difficult between us. I understand that Nonon is cutting all ties with Satsuki. You should not expect that from me,” Ira declared, simple and strident as ever.

“I must say, I'm surprised. I expected that you would find this failing somewhat... unforgivable.”

Ira looked away thoughtfully “If you'd asked me yesterday I would never have imagined that Satsuki was capable of this. But that clearly wasn't the case. There was a time when it would have been impossible, when no matter what she felt she would never engage in a relationship with her own sister or anyone else that might be a stain upon her good name. But even then she made it clear that one day, if we survived, that time would come to an end. I must have misunderstood her, I was just thinking about all the crimes and injustices we committed at Honnouji. She meant that who she was then would end too – that it was an act.”

“That Satsuki the noble and pure wasn't who she really was, just a necessary mask that would inspire us. Keep us in line,” Houka said, following along.

“I'll be honest, I do not want to believe that. But it seems now I must, and I wouldn't want to go back to then, would you?”

“No.”

“Then I will let her have this. A small price to pay for everything she’s sacrificed.”

“I see. But then, does that mean that you want nothing to do with her? Is she no longer the Satsuki who you...” Houka trailed off not because he couldn’t find the right words but because Ira would know what he meant either way

“That she’s not a person I can call family? I’d like to believe that isn’t the case, that she isn’t completely changed from the way she was. And Ryuko too. I’d like to believe that the truth of them is somewhere between what we’ve known and complete strangers. I’m going to try to believe that, and see if I’m forced to realize I was wrong about that too,” Ira shook his head. He didn’t like that outcome, but what else was he supposed to do? “The only way to find out is to see what happens now. You see what I mean now when I say I have no intention of making things difficult between us. That would only make it harder to see the truth of who they are.”

“That’s good. It’s quite possible they’d like to hear that themselves.”

“No, I know what I said but I don’t think I’m read for *that* yet.”

“Fair enough.”

“And what about you? Is your faith shaken?” Ira asked

“Haha! Oh, my faith has been adjusted dramatically since the ‘good old days’ already. Shiro’s known her longer even than Nonon, remember. Soroi’s his uncle, after all. He’s always known things about her she wouldn’t dare tell the rest of us.”

“... Is that so?”

“Now, I didn’t know about *this*, but I guess you could say it doesn’t shake the foundations quite the same. And besides, I’ve got much bigger things to think about. All I that matters to me is that Satsuki – they’re both – on our side,” He said as he got out of the car, “And just as sharp up here as ever.”

He was about to go, but Ira stopped him and said, “One more thing. About last night, did Misaki feel that too?”

“Ah, yes. We’ve been able to deduce what caused that. There will be a full report by tomorrow morning.”

Ira frowned, “I think we’d appreciate an explanation now.”

So Houka sighed and laid out the concepts as simply as he could. In the end Ira was satisfied with the explanation even though Houka left out most of the details of jumping between dimensions. Enough to know that the physical Ryuko they saw wasn’t all of her that there was, and that she could reach out and touch them across gulfs of space.

“So you’ve been experimenting on her again.”

“It’s really amazing. She’s unlocking discoveries which would *never* have been possible without her.”

“That’s good news?”

“Most definitely. And she’s actually enthusiastic about it this time, which is a nice change.”

“Well, just make sure you don’t go overboard, right? Come on Mako, let’s pick something up to eat on the way back.”

Mako leapt into the car, “Let’s get... gigantic ramen bowls! Haven’t had that in a while.”

“Overboard?” Houka said as a farewell, “She’s the one dictating our pace, you don’t have to worry about that.”

~~~~~

Meanwhile down in the lab, Shiro was barely able to contain himself. Izanami kept flashing images of the works she was doing, adjustments being made to their central, most complicated plan.

*[Isn’t it wonderful,]* She murmured, making minute edits to calculations. Laying digital life-fibers along a simulated nervous system, *[We’re so close now! But yet, still so far from understanding everything.]*

“But that’s the beauty of it, we don’t need to understand everything. That will be for *them*.”

*[Oh, I agree.]*

“Did you see how Ryuko spoke about the her ‘spirit world’? There’s so much she isn’t saying. I wish she wouldn’t hold out on us, but maybe that isn’t it. She’s seen things, things that to even envision would snap my mind in half like a *twig*. Her! Haha! Hahaha! Can you imagine?” Shiro was writing the report as he spoke, just about finished with his portion of it. He saved the document, minimized it, “She may *play* dumb, but locked away in there are the secrets to the true nature of entire universe. Ohoho, I’ve got to hand it to Satsuki, she knows you don’t just walk away from something like that.”

*[But in the end she won’t get any answers.]*

“No, I hope she’s satisfied with that. Likely she doesn’t even realize she’s thinking about it. But Ryuko’s not really to blame, is she? To try to explain it with such crude things as words? No, I think she really wants to make us understand, but she can’t. The only thing to fall back on is religious terminology, the concept of a greater mystery. But soon, even words won’t be necessary.”

On his screen, a projection of the Earth. Every second dozens of tiny little pings jumped up across its surface. Izanami had spread herself wide across all the internet, locating every newborn child on Earth and showing their approximate position wasn’t hard. Even though there was no way to sustain them all, those pings kept appearing.

“These children, their generation will be the last humans ever to be born. Oh, it’s even better than I imagined. We aren’t just creating a better human, we’re creating something else entirely! Haha, soon disease, hunger, war, pain, they won’t just be memories – they’ll be incomprehensible!”

*[What a beautiful world]*

“Ryuko won’t abuse omniscience?” He spat, “Hah! She’ll see soon enough that it’s not hers alone. She may chose to never understand, to never see all that she could, but they won’t. The entire

*universe* will be open to them! And you'll be there to see it."

*[Without you...]*

"Oh, what is one life in comparison?" He leaned back in his chair, looking at the ceiling, thinking about the perfection of it all. Wasn't this what humanity had always desired? What even REVOCS sought, misguided though they were? What even *Ragyo* had truly sought? To surpass the flesh and become as gods?

"It is... beautiful," He had to agree.

## Chapter End Notes

Apologies if you feel like I kinda get lost in the reeds a bit with some of these, I do kind of mean to but only to an extent. What I really need to do is just find a way to be more efficient with my words, I know that. It shouldn't take this long to keep up with all the most important characters and advance the plot while still leaving time for fun stuff.

One thing which I think might be a problem is that I may not leave enough to the reader's imagination, like I'm assuming you guys won't get it. That's a bad thing for a writer to do and also mean and I don't mean to do it I'm sorry I don't think you're dumb! Part of this is that I do scientific writing for my job which is such a different beast, length and "reading good" doesn't matter at all what you're trying to do is get your point across as completely and specifically as possible. I feel like this might rub off on my fiction a bit, if you agree or you see sentences of like description or explanation where you thought "yeah I get it" or you just skipped over them because you got it I'd love for some of those to get pointed out to me. It might help me spot them better in the future.

That obviously doesn't mean this won't still be long as hell it could just be a little less long as hell and maybe a little more enjoyable to read.



# Kiryuin Homestead 4

## Chapter Summary

Continuing my tradition of having multiple things going on in each chapter, this one's got some nice domestic Ryuko and Satsuki, some more of Ryuko and Senketsu goofing around in the cosmos, and finally some not-too-shameless Ryuko and Satsuki NSFW stuff at the end. Since it's so varied I thought I'd state that ahead of time.

Will I be able to put the next one out as quick? Depends how long the college I work at keeps labs closed on account of the virus! Fun times for me though I ain't complaining.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March 2067

~~~~~

“Man, what a day!” Ryuko shouted as she and Satsuki flung open the door to her cottage and all but collapsed onto the couch.

Satsuki nodded, “Is it draining on you to jump back and forth like that?”

“On it’s own it’s... not that bad. But y’know it’s that feeling that things feel kind of... oh how do I put it...”

“Slower?”

“Yeah, kind of?”

“Well, that’s what you said before,”

“It’s hard to explain. Maybe it’s more that I’m taking it all in faster, so everything else feels slower. Either way, when you look at what we actually did today most of it we spent on a plane or in a car, but it *feels* to me like I spent double that between the lab and the other side.”

Satsuki looked concerned, “But you *must* be exhausted!” She had a deep urge to get Ryuko to admit she was tired, so she could take care of her and make her feel welcome in this home that was theirs now.

“Nah, don’t worry about me, I do it to myself. Can’t help but talk to Senketsu every time I’m over there. It’s you who really needs the rest.”

“No, don’t trouble yourself with me, I feel fine,” Satsuki said gently.

“Then don’t worry about me either,” Ryuko insisted

“Fine.”

“Fine!” Ryuko crossed her arms resolutely.

But the moment she did they both chuckled and smiled smug little conspiratorial smiles at each other. Her arms uncrossed, Satsuki fell into them, and Ryuko slowly repositioned herself so that she was lying under Satsuki, chin on her forehead, arms tight around her chest. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t mean to dig my elbow in there,” Satsuki said apologetically as she shifted her arm away from the soft side of Ryuko’s belly.

“Mmm,” She was too busy pressing her lips into Satsuki’s hair.

They might have fallen asleep like that if Satsuki’s stomach hadn’t abruptly rumbled some time later. She looked down at it as though confused.

“Uh, were you planning on eating?” Ryuko asked.

“When I got hungry. Which, I suppose, is now,” Satsuki replied, and started to get up before Ryuko stopped her.

“Hey, hold on now. Let me.”

“Really?” Satsuki sat up and allowed Ryuko to stand. She stretched until her blouse (not the same one she’d been wearing during the experiments, that one had blood on it) untucked from her jeans and then nodded confidently.

“Yeah! How hard can it be?” Ryuko tried to be enthusiastic even though she knew Satsuki was a far better cook than her.

Satsuki side-eyed her with amused skepticism, “That does not exactly inspire confidence.”

“I’m sure I’ll find something we can eat.”

~~~~~

Ryuko peered into the fridge, murmuring, “Let’s see... there’s got to be something we can eat in here.” Fresh chicken and tilapia, rice, fruits and vegetables (plenty of which she didn’t recognize). But what to do with them?

Right across the hall, Satsuki was stretched languidly across the couch, reading some book or other. She looked so comfy. *I guess this is what it’s gonna be like from now on. I have this feeling, like the time in my life where living in a big penthouse with a bunch of college pals, partying every weekend (and sometimes during the week) and skipping class all the time is behind me. But I’m only 21, am I really ready to settle down?* Ryuko examined the mess of unlabeled herbs and spices that smelled great to her inhuman nose, but probably wouldn’t be edible unless used properly. Which she didn’t know how to do. There weren’t any bottles of finished sauces or seasoning, just vinegars, oils, several kinds of butter (salted, unsalted, sweet irish, and clarified), “God damn, does she make her own sauces?” If only there were some breadcrumbs, some frying oil, a pack of instant noodles?

*I think I have to be ready. Satsuki’s even less acclimated to my lifestyle than Rei, and that was a big mistake I made, being too pushy with my lifestyle. She needs for that stage of my life to be over,* Ryuko was ready, obviously, but still. She was so young for that! *Younger even than I thought. One*

*day everyone I know now will pass away, except maybe the Kamui. At that point I'll probably be done being human. It'll be time to join Senketsu in his mission to destroy the entire life-fiber network. Not that there's any rush. Given enough time, whether I stay in my human form for sixty more years or ten thousand, I'll be looking back on this time as my youth. But when the day comes that I no longer know any living humans will it be worth trying to start over? And after yesterday... that day could come sooner than I'd like. She wouldn't let anything get near Satsuki ever again. Hell, she wouldn't let anything get near any of them, so long as she could help it.*

*Then that settles it. I am Ryuko the college frat star no longer! Been there, done that. From now on, I'll see what I become. I'll have all kinds of new experiences with Satsuki and Mako and whoever else will accept us. I'll be open to whatever the world throws at me.*

Ryuko opened the freezer. Okay, nothing she could cook, but there had to be some ice cream at least, right?

There was nothing in there except ice trays.

"Except maybe this," She grumbled.

"What was that?"

Ryuko stuck her head into the living room, "Actually, why don't we just get delivery?"

~~~~~

Evening was becoming night and though the greasy take-out had revived them for a while both Ryuko and Satsuki had to admit it was time to turn in.

"You go on," Ryuko said as Satsuki was finishing her hair care for the evening, "There's something I need to do first."

"You're going to see Senketsu again," Satsuki correctly concluded. She didn't sound too happy about it. Well, not about seeing Senketsu. Just about what the process entailed.

Ryuko sighed, "I know you don't like to see me do it, but there's nothing to be worry about, really."

"I'm not tell you not to go," Satsuki came in close, so Ryuko could see that there wasn't any fear in her eyes, just someone bracing for an unpleasant sight. She might as well have been filleting a fish. "Just do it outside, alright?"

" 'Course! I'm not gonna get blood on the carpet, it'd never come out!"

~~~~~

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

*It's just me this time. Ryuko greeted Senketsu warmly, No experimenting this time.*

*Excellent. I want to show you everything you can do now that you're more comfortable with yourself. Senketsu was overjoyed.*

*Great! But before we can do that, there's something else I've been thinking about all day.*

Ragyo? Senketsu had told her that he'd managed to probe into Nui's memories, briefly. What he'd seen was unpleasant. But he knew Ryuko would want to do the same on Ragyo – she had to find out what had made her mother the way she was. It had to be letting raw, unfiltered life-fibers into her body, that seemed most logical. What was Ragyo like before she became evil personified?

But more important than that, if she could still communicate with her, Ryuko would have to make her *pay*.

*No, it's not that. I don't think I'm ready for that.* It was that moment, that one bizarre moment when Ryuko first returned, but it seemed that she had somehow come back before she left. Had that really happened? Did she make that happen? Had she really traveled back in time?

Confusion from Senketsu. *You reconnected at a time you didn't intend? This is my own failing, my attention was divided. You uncovered so much else intuitively, I thought you had figured out time as well, too?*

What? *You're not kidding. I really did time travel, didn't I.*

*Yes. Of course I'll explain everything.*

*Wait. First. I need you to tell me one thing. Tell me I didn't create an alternate timeline. One where I never came back.*

*Ah. I see now why you waited until Shiro wasn't around.* Senketsu seemed quite calm, and Ryuko picked up that he wasn't concerned about alternate timelines or any other catastrophic effects her acts might have. But how could that be?

*I couldn't let him try anything. Not until I was sure it was safe.* Even though she'd wanted to engage with this more than anything. *Now, explain.*

~~~~~

*As a human, you live in a world where time is spoken of like an object. Like a current, sweeping everything along. But that isn't how it is best expressed.* Senketsu envisioned a timeline in a dark room with red stone floors. A thin band of glossy light, straight as an arrow, converging with distant columns in the gloom of the extreme distance. Ryuko, remembering how she imagined herself a body, was suddenly able to stand alongside it (whose imagination was this happening in? Hers? Senketsu's? Some kind of shared imagining?). She was getting more used to this, and so she still remained quite aware of the rest of her vast self and all the side conversations it was having (yes, all of them, reigning in rampaging trains of thought was getting easier too). And she was also naked.

“Whoa, what did you do to yourself?” She laughed, and if Senketsu could blush he might've. But what he'd created to represent himself did not have skin with something resembling natural tone, rather its surface was smooth, oily black with a slight transparency, like an obsidian sculpture. The proportions were exactly what Ryuko would've expected of him. Tall, thin to the point of being underweight, with rough, spiky-short hair and a thin pointed beard that was just as artistically carved as his physique. As for the face though, it looked like he didn't know what to do with it. Just the same fiery orange eyes and a blocky, tall nose that disappeared when looked at head on. He shuffled uncomfortably.

*Ah. It seems I need to work on making human likenesses. There hasn't exactly been anyone around to see it.*

“Hey, I’m pretty good at sculpture now. I’ll make you a face sometime. Otherwise... if you wanna look like a statue it’s not bad.”

*Oh. Well thank you. Regardless, let's continue. So, time is not an object, a flow, a current. It's a direction. A timeline. Just like objects are positioned in space, they are also positioned in time. Relative to each other they can only be before, after, or at the same time. There are no other options. The timeline is the basis for that, it's only a question of where you are on it that determines how you'll perceive it.*

“So there’s definitely only the one?”

*If other timeline s exist, what you did d idn't move you back and forth between them. We are still part of the same one, it's just that we perceive it differently.*

“You’re sure.”

Senketsu’s sentiment on the topic was emphatic, *I tested it quite extensively. Let me show you.* Along the timeline, two thin bands appeared. They hovered parallel to it, each about the length of Senketsu’s arm-span. *Things must exist on a timeline, however the time in which a person is alive isn't a single point, it's an extent.* The bands bent at one end, pinched off into little metal pins that dipped down into the main timeline, crackling with electricity. One walked slowly, steadily, along its band. *For a human, or any other being that must observe things using... organic components. Neurons, signaling chemicals, and such, physical laws dictate that they can only perceive time as moving in one direction. However, for beings such as us that use a neural network of life-fibers...* Now Senketsu picked up the other pin , plucked it from its spot, and poked it into the timeline somewhere else. *We can move our perception to any point we choose. We do not move the timeline, just our position on it.*

Ryuko watched the demonstration with mounting comprehension. She had done this before, Senketsu was right! When she’d first gone to the kamui, the very first time she’d disconnected, she’d looked down at their counterparts and seen that it was night. She realized that wasn’t the time it had been, and suddenly it wasn’t night anymore. She’d been so confused and scared at the time that the incongruence hadn’t even mattered to her!

*Precisely. But yet, your kamui still felt your presence at the correct time, did they not?*

“Yeah... but how? I didn’t even think I’d done anything!”

*I'll show you exactly how I taught myself, if you'll follow.*

As Ryuko was rapidly becoming used to doing, they extended eye-stalks down the Earth’s surface. A cold, rocky beach someone in northern Japan. Nobody around except some seagulls picking amongst plastic refuse.

*Observe. While I am in incorporating Shinra-koketsu I cannot interact with Earth much at all, but lifting a small stone is no trouble.* Just as Ryuko did when she jammed a tiny fraction of herself into the material world to manifest “the eye”, Senketsu unwound a tiny tendril and, in a flash of red light Ryuko watched it wrap itself around a smoothed grey stone and lightly toss it into the ocean. Then he retracted it.

*Now, envision this beach just a second earlier.*

*Huh? That's it? How am I supposed to do that?*

*Just wind things back just a bit. The stone will still be in place, the birds just a bit behind where they are now.*

Ryuko felt like that couldn't possibly work. But it was Senketsu insisting on it. So she tried.

The rock was back on land, and still dry. And Senketsu had another tendril wrapped around a different rock.

*Whoaaaa*

*See? I knew you could do it. Now observe.* He threw the other rock. Then they waited. Suddenly, there was a bright flash of light around the rock Senketsu threw... second? First? It lifted off the ground and sailed into the shallow, lapping waves just as it had the first time. *You see? Just because to us it seems I did those things in a different order, that doesn't mean jumping back overwrote the second rock. Events will only be overwritten by direction intervention.* He skipped back to two seconds before he threw the first rock, moved it a few inches. This time, the second rock flew, but when it was time for the first one to fly, it didn't. *This is just the same as what you did. By making sure your body wasn't in the same place, you overwrote everything that would happen from then on. It never happened. Do over. Only we with nonlinear memories will recall it, and since you didn't do anything to affect the other kamui they will likely have felt it only as a moment of deja vu.*

Ryuko thought she understood. *So what happened to me yesterday then?*

*Yesterday?* Sly amusement from Senketsu. *Ryuko, I took us down three years ago. Right now our bodies are preparing to leap into the Cultural and Sports Grand Festival and fight Ragyo and Satsuki.*

It felt as if every single one of Ryuko's wandering thoughts snapped to attention. **WHAT!**

*Let's go see them.*

~~~~~

Ryuko's initial panic was only dampened slightly by Senketsu's calm, and he knew this. They wouldn't linger long. He'd maybe planned to stay for more than an instant, but she was being torn apart by this.

She couldn't escape the deep, horrible feeling that this was somehow wrong. But no less could she escape the equally awful feeling of longing. Oh, if she could go back to that day, knowing what she knew now, as strong as she had become! She could destroy Ragyo in an instant, Nui too, apologize to Rei for something she'd never experience, and then Satsuki. *Satsuki.* She'd never find out what they were. Ryuko watched herself telling Mako it was too dangerous for her to come with and was drowning in a mixture of fear and wistful sorrow. Everything would be so different if only. If only...

*Do you see? These are just puppets of atoms and threads that we set into motion. Even at the point in your memories when it feels that you were in there, looking from those eyes, that's all they were. And the same goes for the humans – their bodies as you see them are also puppets for what you*

*have been referring to as their “souls”. It’s just their powers or perception are a lot worse than ours.*

*So, you mean if I wanted I could connect myself to **this** version of my body.*

*Bad idea. You could. But a lot would change in an instant if we did. My physical form would instantly disappear so that I could remain in control of the primordial life-fiber and Shinra-Koketsu.*

*Oh. Well there went a large portion of the reason to even consider it.*

*And besides that, Junketsu and all the Goku uniforms would vanish into me as well. And Ragyo and Nui... as they are now our prisoners, I have no idea what would happen to them. Nothing pretty.*

*I see. Ryuko understood now. The temptation was still there, but even more than Senketsu’s breakdown had revealed she understood that this was wrong. Could she throw away the past three years so easily? No, no of course not. So much good had happened in that time, not just to her but to lots of people, both people she knew and people all around the world. Sure, people who were dead now might be alive, but could she make such a monumentuous change just so she could be with Satsuki a few years earlier? No. Never. That was pure greed.*

*This is a very, very dangerous power. She concluded.*

*Her younger self climbed onto Aikuro’s DTR. The jump-jets flared to life. She only wished to tell her that everything would work out alright in the end. But then, there was nobody else behind those eyes. Just a brain that only worked to relay information to the real her, who had already seen it and didn’t need it anymore.*

*Indeed. Let’s return to when you left, then.*

~~~~~

*Now Ryuko was starting to get the hang of this. She returned to the moment before she fired the “desync gun” as she’d started referring to it. If she wired in here it wasn’t like there was enough of a difference to cause a butterfly effect, all that would change is she wouldn’t get blood on the grass.*

*You feel greatly reassured. Senketsu was able to read this from Ryuko quite easily. As you can see, your puppet went through the motions exactly the same.*

*What was that, February 2064? Pretty close to three whole years and it looks like you were right. But... I can’t let the guys get ahold of this. There’s no way they won’t fuck it up.*

*I trust your judgment. I take it you won’t be using the power at all.*

*Well... I have to be very careful, but if I’m doing it over short times, only overwriting maybe a minute... that might be okay. For emergencies, if say someone died near me and I might have had the chance to save them.*

*Senketsu understood that there was no chance she’d do even that without being very thoughtful. There was more than her life to consider here.*

*This ability... if I were to use it to see the future, what would I see?*

*Only a future where you never reconnected to your body, until the moment when you chose to. You haven't taken any actions in that time yet, so if you did but then returned to this moment, every single thing you did would no doubt be overwritten. Another person might get away with lying comatose, but not you. You've become quite important.*

*A future where I stayed disconnected... I don't even want to see it.*

*Neither do I.*

No goodbyes were necessary between them. They both knew she'd be back long before Senketsu got bored.

~~~~~

March 2067

~~~~~

"Ryuko!" Satsuki exclaimed, "You're back?"

"Yup! Ahhh, that was nice. Very nice," Ryuko sighed as she plopped down at the edge of the bed, kicking off shoes and socks and tossing them neatly over to the corner. Satsuki probably wouldn't appreciate them lying everywhere, so she used her reflexes to make sure they landed neatly right next to each other

"You saw him? But I didn't hear a gunshot," Satsuki sat up and set her book aside, puzzled.

"Mhm! You're not gonna have to worry about that anymore," Ryuko said, but truth be told she didn't feel much like explaining it. She kept undressing. "Let's say I found a way to come back even quicker."

"Like... before the bullet was fired?"

"Well yeah. But don't worry, it's not gonna cause time paradoxes or some shit. We tested it."

"I'm not worried. I trust you."

Ryuko smiled, and – just because she could – she used some life fiber tendrils to very gently open the closet door, place her undershirt in the laundry basket and hang her blouse next to Satsuki's shirts and dresses, all while taking off her jeans in one smooth motion.

Then Satsuki added, "But you don't trust Houka and Shiro."

"How astute. Yeah, I had to make sure this time shit wasn't a danger in their hands."

"And?"

"It's fine. We can make safe jumps over like a couple minutes. Enough for a do-over if something bad happens, but even then if they try and get me to use it for anything other than... if you were in danger. I wouldn't do it. Still, it'll get them another Nobel so I'll explain it to them."

Satsuki tapped her chin thoughtfully, "I can't help but feel that you weren't always this good at reading people. Maybe I'm rubbing off on you."



“Sats, before tonight is over you’re gonna do a lot more than rub me off,” Ryuko said, almost surprising herself. She started laughing before she even saw the look of surprise on Satsuki’s face.

“Or maybe not.”

“Yeah, maybe not too much just yet. Maybe I’m just smarter than you thought,” Ryuko said as she unclasped her bra, dropped her panties.

Satsuki extended a hand to her, guided her gently onto the bed until she was right on top of her, lips so close they might as well have already been kissing. They were both smart enough to know that conversation was over.

The degree to which Satsuki still felt nervous, unsure what to do with her hands was dropping steadily, and she found her way to Ryuko’s breasts quite quickly. Ryuko let out a little grunt of pleasure, all she could do with their lips together, and it made Satsuki shiver to be able to produce such an animalistic response. She let Ryuko reposition her until she was laying, knees pressed to either side of Ryuko’s hips. Squeezing tight felt nice too – with Ryuko you never had to worry you were hurting her. This position was something else she was having to get acclimated to, it still made her feel so vulnerable and not in the sexy way (she thought of a turtle flipped upside down). But now she let Ryuko try it once in a while, especially when they were just kissing. She could feel her heart racing. Or was it Ryuko’s? They were so close together now.

And then they weren’t. Ryuko pulled back off of her with a sly look, even as Satsuki panted for breath. She shuffled through the sheets until now her head was between Satsuki’s knees.

“Ryuko? What’re you doing?”

“*Satsuki Kiryuin*. My girlfriend. In our home. What do you think I’m doing?”

Satsuki’s eyes went wide. My god, she wasn’t going to do *that*, was she?

“Ryuko, you don’t – oh!” Satsuki gasped as Ryuko hiked her nightgown up to her belly. The air was cold, but Satsuki didn’t flinch or cringe. She had no interest in giving Ryuko the impression that she didn’t want this.

Ryuko also gasped, in a much more husky voice that terrified Satsuki almost as much as it excited her, “You’re not wearing anything under this.”

“Of course not! It’s nightgown! Ryuko a-are you sure I’m read-”

“-Huh? Sats, it’s no big deal! You’re *definitely* ready.”

“But I’ve never done this before!”

“Sats,” Ryuko laid her chin right on Satsuki’s lower abdomen, looking her right in her alarmed eyes, grabbed hold of her hands. “You’ve had it so rough the last couple days. But now everything’s alright. You’re gonna unwind, *now*, alright? But... if you feel uncomfy, it’s okay, really.”

What an oddly adorable pose. Ryuko kissed her below her bellybutton and that – what a strange feeling that awoke inside her. When she looked back up, Satsuki nodded to Ryuko.

“I trust you.”

There was nothing to be afraid of, Satsuki knew. Actually, she was looking forward to this moment. Another milestone in reclaiming her body, becoming normal. So why was her heart pounding, why did this feel like the frozen moment before a roller coaster drop? Already she was so, so overwhelmed by Ryuko's presence. Was she afraid that she would go even further somehow? That it would feel like melting away, like the purity ritual used to feel?

But after a preparatory nuzzle, she felt Ryuko's tongue. And that was *very* hard to turn down. Satsuki made an embarrassing squeak and squeezed Ryuko's hands even tighter.

And it was good. *God*, it was good. Satsuki couldn't even tell what was happening anymore. She tried to relax herself, thinking blearily that if she was stiff Ryuko would think she was scared. But the moment she did that, another stab of undefinable pleasure – *Where on, no, in me is she even touching?* - made her arch her back. She felt Ryuko chuckle against her skin.

*It's so degrading! So disgusting!* The thoughts rattled around in Satsuki's head. *And the taste! How does it taste? How can she be so nonchalant about subjecting herself to this?*

"God, you're so beautiful Sats," Ryuko murmured when she momentarily came up for air.

*It's because she loves me. She loves me! It's proof of how much she loves me that she'd put herself through such degradation! She'd do anything to make me feel this way because it makes her happy too. She loves me! She really, really does love m-e-*

That was what Satsuki was thinking when she reached her climax and all conscious thought briefly blotted out. The first time she'd felt this it had panicked her, it was so much more immediate and fleshy and *in her* than the purity ritual had ever been. But now that was what made all the difference. The wonderful warmth shot through her body and the ceiling swam for who knew how long until eventually Ryuko's face came into view, the red in her hair glittering.

"I-I love you, Ryuko," Was all she could think to say.

"And I love you too, beautiful," Ryuko smirked and flopped down beside her, "Y'know, it's a lucky thing we don't have roommates. You can get pretty loud when you want to."

Satsuki's face froze. She would have gone red if her face wasn't already flush. "I did?"

"Ohh, don't be embarrassed! I liked it."

"Well what did I say?"

"Who knows? Who can really say?"

"Ryuko," This time it was Satsuki's turn to be on top, pinning Ryuko to the pillows, "You have to tell me." She planted her lips at the base of Ryuko's neck – sometimes erogenous, sometimes a ticklish spot, Satsuki had found.

"Phahaha! Sats stop, stop, geez!" When Satsuki relented, Ryuko grabbed her by the wrists and was back to that irresistible husky voice, "You wanna know so bad? You gonna make me scream too now, huh? Maybe you'll find out."

Satsuki did manage to get Ryuko to scream too that night. But the contents... so much swearing... no way that was what she'd screamed, right?

## Chapter End Notes

Also, I believe my interpretation of time is somewhat consistent with a layperson's understanding of how we view time, which is like a modified version of general relativity. If it doesn't seem right to you on a physics level sorry but that's how I'm doing it.

And since I'm on this I want to again say, though I don't think anyone's asking, that this fic isn't gonna become a thing that's mostly about some weirdo time travel stuff. The time stuff exists as a thematic piece as Ryuko becomes more aware and more accepting of how inhuman she is - there's nothing much more inhuman than experiencing nonlinear time. It's how she'll act knowing about this and how other characters will react to this knowledge as well that matters more than any actual use of this power. I really hope that reassures any worried readers because I'm sure some of you are expecting the whole thing to fly off the rails at any moment.

# Ring of Fire: Krakatoa: 1

## Chapter Summary

First part of the end to the Ring of Fire arc. Idk how long it'll take me to construct these ones, since they're gonna be complex it might be kind of time consuming.

April 2067

~~~~~

In the Sunda Strait between the islands of Java and Sumatra, far on the western edge of the Indonesian islands, there is a chain of four small islands. None more than a few miles across, they are arranged in a roughly circular shape – Verlaten in the northwest, Lang in the northeast, Rakata in the south. And in the center there is one diminutive, barren dome of black basalt.

Krakatoa.

Once the site of a great eruption from which ash traveled all across the globe, but inactive since 2018, the mount still trailed a long, thin line of sulfurous smoke. For in truth these islands were not separate entities but the lips of a deep caldera at those few points where it crested lazily above the shallow sea with its bleached coral and tangled rafts of plastic trash.

Not too long ago, the outlying islands had been covered in virgin rainforest, but REVOCS had fortified them and transformed this peaceful atoll into a three-pointed fortress of concrete and bristling artillery. This was their greatest stronghold in Indonesia, and it guarded not one, but *three* of their titanic obelisks. Finished obelisks, great resolute lines of black stone that stretched up into the sky, seemingly infinite, with brilliant red glow emanating from within.

This was where the final battle of this campaign would be fought. Whatever the obelisks were meant for, these ones were ready – but evidently they weren't meant to activate until the entire array was complete. So, on the second day of April, the liberation fleet arrived with Nonon at the helm.

*Look at this. I'm commanding a battlefleet seventy-five ships strong packed with thousands of soldiers who I turned from refugees into a loyal fighting force to rival Honnouji,* She thought to herself as dawn rose on the day of battle. Perched on the top of the highest antenna on her command ship, a huge aircraft carrier, she could observe the entire fleet in staggered formation across the inky morning sea. "Well, it wasn't just me," She said to Saiban.

*[And it wasn't just us either. It's time we think about how we'll reward the others once we're back home.]*

Nonon giggled at the thought. A little victory party with just the four of them (after the main event) which would hopefully end with all of them passed out piss drunk. It sounded pretty fun. Would

definitely make getting back home a bit more bearable – it had been nearly a week but thinking about seeing Satsuki and Ryuko again still wasn't any easier. She wanted to pound her head onto a brick wall. It felt like she was.

*[You don't want to go back, do you?]*

“Honestly?... No,” Overheard a deep booming noise was occasionally heard from the red-stained sky. Even though the islands weren't even visible over the horizon yet the air battle had already begun. Regenerating life-fiber buzzers and those blind bomber drones against Nudist Beach gyro-fighters that could turn on a dime and blink across the sky using centrifugal, gravity powered engines, all zooming too quick and at too great a distance for the naked eye. Nonon had come to love that sound. And though the islands weren't visible the obelisks were, perfect thin little lines that disappeared into the sooty clouds, an unnatural shape like something from a dream. It filled them with a sense of impending... well, not doom, but *something* was about to happen. Even more than the aura of all the life-fibers down there.

*[I can't blame you. It's not like I'm especially happy about losing the freedom to fight whenever we want. I wonder how soon after this we can shift focus to the fight for Australia?]*

“Hopefully not long. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We won't be able to see what comes after today until those things are gone from the horizon,” Nonon said, more to herself than Saiban. Things were drawing to a close here, when they broke the enemy in this battle afterward it really would be mop up, and in a month. So she'd been thinking a lot about what would come after. She'd have to oversee the transition to whatever new form of government would control this land, that wasn't surprising.

But what about what she'd realized – that they were fighting not to eradicate life-fibers from Earth but to determine whether they would conquer it or assimilate with it? That Satsuki had likely already realized this, and Shiro, Houka, and of course Ryuko too? That was what she'd been thinking far more about. Sometimes she still thought of it the old way – this alien intellect must truly be more advanced than they, for even in defeat it had almost without missing a beat wormed its way into the hearts of her enemies. But then she remembered Saiban was life-fiber, life-fiber with feelings and a mind that maybe wasn't quite human but was close enough. And so were all the rest, and so too was even Ryuko mostly human. All too human.

What would a future of symbiosis with the life-fibers look like? Beyond those obelisks, she would find out. But even though defeat wasn't an option, she couldn't treat victory as a foregone conclusion either.

It was time to begin. Nonon dropped down from her perch and set along the walkway at a brisk, determined pace.

~~~~~

“Hey, Nonon!” Mataro yelled behind her. It sounded like he wanted something She kept walking, and he fell in at pace with her.

“If you couldn't tell, I'm kinda under a little stress today. I don't need you underfoot,” She said dismissively.

“I know, that's why I already gathered everyone for your briefing on the bridge. And I talked to the sound and lights guys and made sure everything's all set for your address.”

“Hmm!” Nonon acted surprised, but truth be told since her injury she’d come to rely on Mataro as a messenger – he was always loitering around. Give him a few hours to get familiar with a base, palace, office, battleship, and he could find his way around faster than anyone. So yeah, being a messenger was a good fit for him... and housekeeper, spy, training dummy, food taster (let’s not have Sukuyo hearing about that one). To be around when important things were happening rather than shoved aside for fear of his safety he’d do just about anything. “Not bad, kid. So, what is it then?”

“Is it really true? You’re really gonna borrow some of Ryuko’s power for this fight?”

Nonon stopped walking, frowned, “who told you that?”

“Uzu. Nobody knows nothing, don’t worry.”

“Good,” Nonon nodded and resumed her pace, “I don’t want the rank and file to know our power *can* be boosted, it’s better for morale if they think we’re always at an unbeatable maximum . Yeah, it’s true.”

Mataro nodded but didn’t say anything until Nonon said, “... And?”

“I didn’t think you’d allow it.”

“ *Insightful* ,” Nonon spat with the most dismissive sarcasm possible.

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’ve only been fuming about her since forever,, should I have expected something else?.”

Nonon explained, “More power is more power kid, and today we need as much as we can get. You wouldn’t understand.” Mataro shrugged, so she went on, “And besides once she decided she would help out, well, y’know how she is, you lived with her. She’s an animal, there’s no stopping her.”

Mataro blurted, “That’s not what she’s like!” then instantly regretted it when he thought Nonon was gonna punch him in the gut. But she didn’t – he had a point, none of that really explained it because he knew that if Ryuko insisted she’d just dig her heels in harder.

“Well, you probably never stopped her from doing exactly what she want. But... asides from that, the others have already tested the empowerment process and they all agreed to go forward with it. Apparently they think the side effects are more tolerable than the ones from the new model of those booster pills Shiro made for you.”

“Side effects?”

“You *really* wouldn’t understand.”

Mataro shrugged, then laughed as he took the roll of pills out from his pocket and examined them, “Kinda funny, huh? These things became obsolete before they ever managed to use them.”

They had reached the doors to the bridge. Nonon turned to Mataro and closed his hand around them a grave expression. “Hold onto those today, y’hear? And stay in the comms room, it’s the safest place. You aren’t supposed to be anywhere near here today, your mom will flip if she finds out.”

“Already got one in my mouth,” He nodded.

“Cool. Now get lost kid,” She flung open the doors. Uzu, Tsumugu, and Aikuro were already waiting at attention, and on a screen Houka and Shiro were in a video call, also standing ready. “It’s showtime.”

~~~~~

The plan was, if Nonon said so herself, perhaps her greatest composition to date. Starting from the end measure, the grand finale would be the destruction of the obelisks. But simply knocking them over wouldn’t do, no, having one of those things fall into the ocean would create a tidal wave that could wipe out cities all along the strait. So they’d have to shut down the life-fiber engines at their base. Trouble was, those were covered in high-velocity life-fiber shields, otherwise flinging Kamui at them would be enough. They would have to be invaded on foot and that meant all the squishy, human infantry in their amphibious landing crafts would have to get involved. And why not just have the Kamui do the on foot invasion? Well, because that caldera was about to become a cauldron of total pandemonium and without the Kamui to keep that off their backs nobody was going to set foot on those islands.

“First task, obviously, disabling all the enemy artillery. That includes the navy, they’ve moved into tight defensive formation around the islands – quite a noisy percussion section. Oh, but do try to keep the ships afloat, they’ll make good platforms for us to fight between. Unless, y’know, you prefer swimming.”

From there, each of their roles would be defined. Houka and Shiro were there as eyes in the sky, coordinators. As always they were more than equipped. Uzu, her virtuoso, would target the very largest battlemechs – there were a couple that rivalled the Honnouji defcon machine in size wading through the water. Only a life-fiber powered machine could be that gigantic.

~ “*We’ve had reports that the mecha squadron is being led by Takamori Kiryuin himself, one of their highest commanders. He nearly died giving us the slip, finishing the job is high priority,*” ~ Houka added

“What? He’s here?” Uzu was surprised, “I’d be happy to take that jawless freak down. Is he supposed to be a good fighter?”

“Great, another Kiryuin,” Nonon said snidely, “As far as I know they’re all at least decent, part of their ‘noble education’.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Then Tsumugu would conduct the supporting ensemble, the infantry, and shepherd them ashore. To him Nonon warned, “We don’t know what they’ll fling at you. Expect anything and everything.”

“Always,” He affirmed. Reiketsu’s impossibly deep pockets were already full of just about anything he could need.

“Good. Yuda will be along with you too, he’ll lead the indoor fighting.”

And then Aikuro would bring the bass, bringing in the advance vanguard of the navy for a full encirclement. He would keep the fleet from being bombed to hell – once the enemy artillery was taken out they would surely retaliate. “You’ll have a command view over the battlefield, so yours is the role with the most improvisation. Call the shots as you see fit,”

“Command from the front, eh?” Aikuro said sarcastically. He was just kidding, of course, plenty of trouble found him even though throughout this entire campaign he usually played defense given his sharpshooting skills.

“Ah can it. And don’t be afraid to get your hands dirty.”

“So if I’m holding down the command point, where will you be?”

Why, she’d be the soloist, of course. There was one big role that hadn’t been covered yet. Taking down the enemy Kamui. Nothing else mattered if that wasn’t handled. “I’ll keep her busy until the mission has been handled, then the four of us will converge and *crush* her!”

“Right!” They all agreed in unison.

Nonon smirked and looked at them seriously, “Now that’s out of the way, how’re we feeling? Good?” They all nodded in affirmative, “We all ready to give this empowerment thing a shot in real combat? This is a big moment for experimental methods, we can’t fuck it up.”

“It’ll work,” Aikuro said, “The science is… well, it’s all revolutionary, but we triple checked Houka’s numbers. It works.”

“Yeah,” Uzu agreed, “Those pure Kamui are tough – they’re stronger and faster, even though we’re closing the gap. It’ll be nice to finally hit ‘em on even footing.”

Nonon nodded, “A lot’s riding on Ryuko to pull through with this, how’s that sit with you?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, sure.”

“It’s kind of how we roll.”

“Uh-huh,” She said tersely, “And having her inside your heads? We all cool with that?”

Aikuro said, “that first night was a bit of an exception. Only very rudimentary feelings leak through. It tones down to just, I dunno, focus on the fight? You haven’t tried it, you’ll see.” The others agreed.

“But Ryuko? You’re sure?”

For a moment, nobody said anything, until Tsumugu finally said, “Oh go ahead, ask us already.”

“Ask you what?”

“We all know you want to hear what we think of her and Satsuki. Frankly, I’m surprised it’s taken you this long, hardly the time for it,” He grumbled.

“What? Why would I need to ask that, I already know you’re all fine with it,” Nonon said dismissively. But Tsumugu cleared his throat, got up from leaning on the wall.

“There are two things you need to know. One: As a matter of fact I’m not fine with it, I’m actually looking forward to getting done with this so I can go back to Japan and ask her what the *hell* she’s



thinking. Two: That doesn't change the fact that she's family. They both are. Or that I trust her to do what's right in a combat situation."

Nonon was shocked. *[Tsumugu's practically her uncle, and a pretty uptight one at that. In her place I wouldn't be looking forward to that]* Saiban remarked, and Nonon had to agree.

"Can you at least respect that?" Tsumugu asked.

It didn't take Nonon much consideration to say, "I can respect that, yeah."

"And I don't care either way," Aikuro said more nonchalantly, "It's their lives, not mine. Seems like they've taken all necessary precautions, so I'm waiting to see how it plays out."

"Of course," Nonon rolled her eyes. Aikuro chuckled.

"Hey, I didn't say I thought it was a good idea. But maybe we all should've seen it coming anyway."

"The real question is," Tsumugu asked, "Are you prepared for this?"

"I have no other option. Fighting Rosuketsu is the biggest responsibility on the battlefield, there's no room for failure."

Nobody suggested she leave it to someone else. After this long with Nonon as their commander they knew that every time some obstacle presented itself she would fume and sputter and then get over it. Their initial separation, the months of back and forth slog, failing to kill the enemy Kamui time and again, the betrayal of her brother – from an outside perspective she must've looked too fragile to handle any of those things, but yet here she was.

~ "One last thing, before we start," ~ Shiro said as the others left to get ready for the big speech that would begin the battle, ~ "Ryuko and Satsuki are ready to be video conferenced in for their address. Should I – you don't want to talk to them. Do you?" ~

Nonon thought about it, "I need to speak to Ryuko. Just Ryuko. Make sure Satsuki's out of the room. And have Izanami block all other transmission that might get out on either side. I won't say don't listen in, I know you will anyway." It was maybe Shiro's greatest stroke of unintentional genius that the guiding intelligence of the most powerful surveillance software ever made was an incorrigible gossip.

~~~~~

~ "Hey," ~ Ryuko said. Nonon grunted by way of greeting. ~ "So, we're really doing this, huh?" ~

Ryuko was done up in her military ensemble, her hair already glowing. *God help you, you even look like Ragyo now. What was it I ever found mildly amusing about you? Why did I respect you until not too long ago? I can't believe I'm saying this, but Mataro's a good kid, and **you're** his role model? He deserves better!*

She couldn't contain herself. Like a pot boiling over, she blurted "You make me sick."

~ "I..." ~ Ryuko looked physically hurt by the words.

“Let’s get a couple things clear, you and I. I know you aren’t really Ragyo in there. Frankly I wish you were, because then I wouldn’t have to know you’ve been lusting after *your own sister* for years, right in front of all of us. But I won’t be accusing you of that again, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

~ “*Am I supposed to **thank** you for that?*” ~

“Wouldn’t hurt.”

*[Cool it Nonon! What do you think you’re doing!]*

Nonon went on, “Now that we’ve got that out of the way, listen here. Everyone’s vouched that this is safe, and you’d better make fucking sure it is. We’ve worked so hard for this moment, and I won’t let you jeopardize that. I don’t care how much they trust you. Here’s how it’s gonna go. You give us power right before the battle starts, and you keep empowering us for fifteen minutes. Just fifteen, and then *I* will send *you* a simple yes or no signal of whether or not you should continue. You don’t get to second guess that, you don’t get to hesitate, you don’t get to disobey or take a single thing into your own hands. *You. Aren’t. Here.* You have no idea what’s going on down on the ground and we have tens of thousands of *people* fighting for their lives. So for once in your life shut up and follow orders.”

~ “*Jesus, okay, I get it! I get it! You seriously can’t thin k I’m that stupid!*” ~

Again, the words came out of Nonon’s mouth before she thought about them. “Are you kidding?” She laughed harshly, “I don’t know what kind of freak you really are, but you don’t fool me like the others. I know you’re physically incapable of sticking to a plan for even half a second. I don’t know how the hell you tricked Satsuki into this doomed fucking venture, but I guess I’m happy that at this point I can just wait for it to blow up on you.”

~ “*Don’t think I don’t see what this is. You’re just jealous I stole Satsuki, aren’t you? Well that was your decision, she’d be **happy** to talk to you again if you’d just stop being a cu-*” ~

“Oh please,” Nonon cut her off dismissively, “Like I care about her anymore.”

~ “*Cut the bullshit.*” ~

“And you should know, by the way, Satsuki and you will never work out long term. *Even if* nobody finds out, which they’re gonna do, she won’t really be satisfied with you. Satsuki wants someone reasonable, someone who can keep up with her, someone with, like, any ambition at all. You’ll be at each others’ throats in a month.”

Again, Ryuko looked like Nonon had punched her. Even after being separated for months, Nonon still knew her insecurities all too well. *Yeah right, no way she thinks I believe that*, she thought. She did kind of though, even though it didn’t make sense. But she’d couldn’t stop thinking to herself that this was too good to be true, Satsuki was too good to be true, and here Nonon was agreeing with her.

~ “*Is there anything else?*” ~ She asked darkly.

“Don’t fuck it up. I’m serious, if not for me then for the rest of the guys and all the soldiers. Even *you* can appreciate that, right?”

~ “Of course. I think **you’re** the one who’s forgotten we’re on the same side here. No matter what you say to me. No matter what.” ~

~~~~~

“Jakuzure, you asked to see me?” Yuda said, sliding into the still-empty bridge moments after Nonon had hung up with Ryuko. He was just too late to hear Izanami’s synthesized voice demanding, ~ “*What the hell was that?*” ~ over the speakers. Nonon couldn’t explain if she wanted too. It didn’t even feel good to hear Ryuko start to sob as the call ended. She didn’t turn around to face Yuda.

“Uwais, how are you? Preparations for the address going well?”

“Yes ma’am,” He answered, a bit unsure, “It’s... almost time to start.”

“Oh, I just wanted to make sure I talked to you before the battle started. How’re the men? Fired up?”

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

She nodded, smiled, “You’ve been talking up Lady Ryuko a lot since you got back, haven’t you?”

“Jakuzure, I-” He started, but quickly cut himself off.

“No, go on,” She said.

“Look, I know there’s some kind of power struggle going on between you too. I don’t think any of the soldiers know. But meeting her in person, y’know, we got along pretty well and then, I mean, how could I *not* – but nah, what happened that day probably isn’t even impressive to you.”

“Don’t worry, I understand that. They’ve probably been asking about it, I wouldn’t expect you not to tell them about it. That’s not really what I’m worried about.”

“Yeah. But you don’t have to worry about that.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Well, you’re my commanding officer. My loyalty is to you. I mean, I’d be honored if Lady Ryuko considered me a friend, I *like* her. But that doesn’t matter. Besides she’s just a citizen. Well, kind of. I guess a citizen who’s dating your commanding officer but nevertheless,” Yuda explained quickly.

“What? Oh, you misunderstand. I’m just worried that you’re telling people Ryuko and I are at odds. It’s not true. Ryuko and I are having just a... a personal spat, alright? Make sure everyone understands that.”

“Oh, yeah, fair enough. Sorry, guess I misinterpreted. Uh, what about?” Yuda was relieved that he wasn’t in any serious trouble. It was reassuring to know that those above him were unified.

Nonon laughed, finally turning around to face him now that the red was finally leaving her face “Come on man, I’m not gonna tell you *that*. All you need to know is that we might not get along, but our goal is the same: victory.”

When Yuda left, Nonon blew a huge sigh through her cheeks, “Holy shit Saiban we gotta get to the fight soon, huh? Whoo...” She signed again, “This is just like a concert, huh? Fucking performance anxiety, used to never get it. I guess I never had a stage big enough for it.”

She could tell that Saiban was deeply concerned, and for good reason. He was the only one who knew how agitated she was becoming. Maybe they shouldn’t have put off worrying about this until the last minute. But Nonon wasn’t panicking, there wasn’t time for that, *[Maybe you should take a breather, just for a moment, and... no, you’re right, there’s no time. Things will become easier i n battle.]*

~~~~~

The aircraft carrier’s deck was already filled with columns of soldiers, neatly ordered with grim faces and glinting needle guns. The DTRs marched in lines between them with smooth whirs as their legs glided more gracefully than seemed possible for a machine. Being out there on the balcony beneath the bridge tower, in the fresh tropical sea breeze with the sky slowly filling with blue made her head feel cooler, less cramped. Having all their eyes on her made her feel like her problems were small and far away now.

“You all ready to turn up the noise, huh?!” She shouted, her voice shrill but booming over the loudspeakers, her face projected larger than life on the screen behind her. “You all ready to crack some heads?!” Her Indonesian had improved from just some basic phrases to passable fluency, and though the speech was of course rehearsed her pronunciation was impeccable. The response from the crowd was deafening.

“Good. We’ve all worked so, so hard for this, and now it’s here. Now, I don’t need to tell you who we’re up against. I don’t need to tell you what’s at stake if they win. I don’t need to tell you how we’ll stop that - you all know your jobs and you’ll do them the best any man can. Hmm, is there anything I *can* tell you that you don’t already know?”

She allowed a momentary pause for dramatic effect.

“Oh yeah! How about that at this time tomorrow you won’t be saying ‘My country is being invaded by world-eating aliens and their slaves’, you’ll be saying ‘My country was invaded by world-eating aliens and their slaves, *AND WE KILLED THEM ALL!*’” In sync with that, she unfolded *Kiba* to its full size in her hand, blade leveled in the direction of Krakatoa. Another massive roar from the crowd. “With a little help from some friendlier aliens, of course,” She added with a little giggle.

“And there’s one other thing I’d like to tell you all. A little treat I think you’ll like.” She stepped out of from the frame of the screen pointed, *Kiba* at it. “I present to you, Satsuki Kiryuin and Ryuko Matoi!”

The screen shifted, the back-lights from it so powerful that they illuminated through to the ship’s deck. Brilliant light, but... only one silhouette.

Nonon’s heart dropped. Oh no. *[You’ve done it now]* Saiban groaned, and she didn’t have anything to say back. But evidently nobody else really questioned this presentation as Satsuki stepped forward so her face was revealed, as regal and severe as ever.

~ “ *My friends, thank you so much for standing strong with us. I imagine that many of you may be afraid right now. It’s no shame, it is quite natural. You might remember words I once said: ‘fear is freedom’. But that isn’t true. It is in mastering your fear that freedom lies. You must make*

*yourselves like the very rocks of the Earth – unbreakable, patient, a unified whole. Trust in your comrades! Each of them is an extension of you, your aims are united and together you make a spear with a power no force in the universe can shake! Good fortune to you, and I am proud to fight this war alongside you!” ~ Satsuki also got deafening applause from the soldiers, and Nonon could hear the other nearby ships cheering as well. They also were watching the address on screens like this one, as were people in cities across the country, and plenty more around the world.*

For one unbearable moment, Satsuki stepped back into the lights and nothing else happened, and Nonon wished she could just be struck dead on the spot. But then the light from the screen changed to red and the audience gasped.

Ryuko had stepped into the camera frame. Her face was fiery with that furious determination, brows furrowed, lips set into a beautiful frown. And her mascara and eyeliner ran together in red tear-trails down her face.

Everyone was struck, and Uzu blurted, “What the hell? Why’s she crying?”. Nonon averted her eyes. Unbelievable. And she couldn’t even pretend this wasn’t her own damn fault. Whatever happened now she’d lost the battle before it even started.

*~ “I just wanna say one thing. I was talking to your commander, Nonon Jakuzure, and her Kamui Saiban.” ~*

*Oh no oh fuck oh no oh fuck oh no oh fuck oh no oh fuck!*

*[Oh no oh fuck oh no oh fuck oh no oh fuck oh no oh fuck!]*

*~ “And they told me how hard you’ve all been fighting to get here today. And I just want to tell you – I just want to tell you how moved I am. She told me that without being there with you, I could never understand. And she’s right. You know, all she wanted to talk about was how important it was to her that every single one of you had the best chance of surviving. The Kamui are my creations, my children. And you’ve accepted them as your own, and I couldn’t be happier. So even though I’m not with you today, know that I’m watching over you. I love you all, thank you.” ~*

The screen cut to black, and if the cheering for Nonon and Satsuki was deafening this was painfully so.

**“Ma-toi! Ma-toi! Ma-toi! Ma-toi! Ma-toi! Ma-toi!”**

Aikuro murmured, “That was-”

“-Inspired. The word you’re looking for is inspired,” Uzu finished.

“Did Satsuki teach her that?” Tsumugu wondered. “Crying was a masterstroke, I wouldn’t have thought she could turn on the waterworks.”

Nonon had nothing to say. She’d been upstaged utterly, and she had only herself to blame. But by the same token, her army was more fired up to win that she could have ever achieved on her own.

And that was what mattered.

“You heard the lady,” She said into the microphone. “Our show begins now.”

# Ring of Fire: Krakatoa: 2

## Chapter Summary

And here we go with the gigantic, ridiculous battles. This is kind of proof of concept for the others that will come down the line in the series, to see if I can do it and where I'll have to improve. It's exciting to write! But also complicated, and I find myself trying to make sure I'm not having various characters do things in an order that doesn't make sense.

I suspect that I will need two or three more chapters to round this off, and like this one they will be long and take maybe a few extra days on top of what I usually need. So as always critique is really great for me!

And again, I understand that this kind of stuff isn't really why most people come to AO3. But if you're reading this you've stuck with me this long, please indulge me as I attempt to bring my dreams of superhuman warfare to life.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2067

~~~~~

As dawn broke, REVOCS' radar perimeter picked up a squadron of unmanned drones speeding directly towards the Krakatoa caldera. They zoomed low over the ocean at the absolute maximum velocity they could take without tearing apart. That looked like a kamui delivery system alright, and so rather than let them get close a flight of their own life-fiber drones was ordered in to pick them off. Once those seekers had a target evasive action was impossible, and the drones exploded in air instantly. Of course, that wouldn't be enough to kill a Kamui, so another flight, and then another, then half the fleet and all the surface artillery trained in on the floating scraps and everything for a half a mile in every direction including down into the water. When the explosions stopped, there was a brief moment of pure, tense silence. Surely even if that still hadn't broken their defenses they must have drowned, right?

And then the decks of their four largest aircraft carriers were obliterated.

~~~~~

Minutes ago and miles above in a sleek black stealth fighter high above the clouds, Nonon took a deep breath and prepared for the final plunge.

"Looks like they took the bait," She observed as Saiban sensed the destruction of their decoy drones. "Ready to dance?"

Tsumugu and Uzu were in the troop hold with her, faces set with determination. Aikuro was flying – no extra crew on this flight, the plane wasn't coming back. Presently he kicked on the autopilot

and came out from the cockpit, saying, “Last stop!”

*[It's so beautiful this high up,]* His Nekketsu observed calmly, *[Too bad we aren't staying long].*

*[It's a pretty picture down there too,]* Reiketsu responded.

*[An all you can eat buffet!]* Seijitsu added. Saiban didn't comment, but they could all feel that he was practically salivating. His aura sensing was more powerful than theirs and the “scent” of them all was overwhelming. The instinct to hunt and feed would do as much as the years of training their humans had endured. But he shared Nonon's apprehension, and they could feel that too, and so all their wearers had a secondhand sense of it.

Seeking to alleviate the tension, Uzu said, “So, if we're going stick with two-stars being worth one point, three-stars ten, hybrid beasts twenty, what are mechs?”

“Hang on, we're playing the game today?” Aikuro asked.

*If you had any brains you wouldn't,* Nonon thought testily.

“Well yeah, might as well, it's gonna be our last chance for a while.”

Aikuro nodded wistfully, “That's right. Gee, almost makes me a little nostalgic. When we set out, I gotta say I expected a lot less trouble than we had. Seems like so long ago.”

*You should've learned to expect trouble around every corner. You've been doing this longer than me, don't tell me you haven't learned that yet.*

“Yes, but don't forget, all our real setbacks occurred in the beginning. Once we fully understood our enemy, were forced to stopped underestimating them, we've basically been victorious at every angle,” Tsumugu added.

*And that's exactly why it's more critical than ever that we don't lose. This would be a hell of a time to start underestimating them again. Well I'll never underestimate them, ever again.*

“Which reminds me,” Tsumugu went on, “There's more than one kind of hybrid beast, I don't think they're all worth the same.”

Uzu frowned, “Well, the little ones are worth nothing.”

“We ever show you the hybrid whale we found in the labs in Ragyo's old tower?” Aikuro asked, “Now *that* was a monster!”

“Indeed, so I suggest if we run into something like that it can be worth extra, and the same for the larger mechs. Deal?” Tsumugu said.

“Wait a minute, what about Nonon? She's just focusing on Rosuketsu, how can we score that?”

Nonon was about to declare that she wasn't playing and none of them should be either, but instead Aikuro said, “Well, if she takes it down she wins, right? Seems simple enough to me.”

Nonon smiled, “You're right about that much.”

~ “*Ryuko is ready. Just give the word,*” ~ Houka said through their earpieces. Nonon wasn’t the only one who was a bit nervous, though. They all knew about Nonon’s fifteen minute “test run” – and all agreed cutting them off from extra strength mid battle would be monumentally stupid. Not that they wouldn’t win either way, but if Nonon was really taking this seriously she wouldn’t dream of depriving them just because of a personal vendetta. Would she?

“Alright, bring it in,” She held *Kiba* out flat in between them. Uzu placed his Katana on top of it, then Aikuro his bladed bow and Tsumugu his broadsword. They’d all been briefed, the speeches were done, this one was just for them, “You’ve all learned your military history, right? Can you think of a time before today when someone had the bright idea of sending in the cavalry first?”

“Battle of Troyes,” Tsumugu muttered.

“Waterloo,” Aikuro added with an irreverent smile.

“Basically all of the Vietnam War? Airborne cavalry, but still,” Uzu added.

“Alright, fine, geez!” Nonon snapped back, but not with any force. If she wasn’t expecting them to correct her she wouldn’t have bothered, and it got a genuine smile on their faces despite the nerves. “But consider this: what kind of cavalry is it that can destroy an enemy fort all on its own? We’re cavalry, siege, high command, everything all rolled into one. These four blades will decide this battle all on their own. And that’s how every battle will be from now on. It’s the end of military history. Surrounded, outnumbered? Doesn’t matter. Compared to Ragyo this is *nothing*. So when the rest of the army gets here they won’t see a single thing standing. They’ll be wondering what the *fuck* we did to the place.”

They all nodded in unison. “Uzu? Take it away.”

Uzu cleared his throat, “Everyone, WHAT DAY IS IT?”

“IT’S LAUNDRY DAY IN KRAKATOA!” They shouted in unison, and Uzu giggled giddily. Finally they’d managed to nail it. Then Nonon gave her signal that they were ready for Ryuko.

The effect was immediate. The surge of power that was momentarily painful then merely electrifying shot through them all, even though they hadn’t transformed yet. For Uzu, Aikuro, and Tsumugu it was immediately familiar to them, this feeling of something warm and fluid sluicing through their Kamui, spilling out as light until their skin was enrobed in flames. Electrifying their bodies, this energy roiled their stomachs. The feeling reminded Uzu oddly off the feeling of wearing a Goku Uniform for the first time; unlike their Kamui this wasn’t their own strength. It could overwhelm them and drag them under.

As if they needed the reminder. They could feel Ryuko’s presence once again. Only this time it didn’t come with such a great gush of uncomfortable affection, but instead clear vigor. If it could be put into the words the feeling would be, *Ah, my brothers in arms!* And there was nothing to do but clench your fingers into claws, imagine all the extra energy and pain crackling out through them, and howl until they achieved a balance between the torrent and themselves.

“GYAAA-hahaHA!”

But Nonon turned her back to them, and it was a good idea because in that instant her face blanched. There was that pain and adrenaline-pumping power sure, but it didn’t come in an



overwhelming torrent. And Ryuko's presence - Nonon hadn't known what to expect, but it wasn't this.

Rage or hate she was ready for, but she never expected *sorrow*.

*Why did it have to turn out this way?* Ryuko's impression seemed to be saying, *Just change one simple little fact, and you wouldn't hate me. You'd be happy for us!* There was no feeling of blame, just lamentation. *How did it come to this?*

And Nonon *loathed* it. She didn't want to feel this! Why couldn't the animosity flow through Ryuko just as it did her? Why wouldn't the power flow properly either! It was like it was beating at the door, a portcullis folded into Saiban somewhere next to her heart, but he just *couldn't. open. It!*

The others could see that there was clearly something up. The strength of Saiban's presence spiked just like theirs, but her body wasn't cloaked in flames. Oh sure, it was glowing, but somehow the light wasn't illuminating her body. More like she was the *source* of the light, though shadows still fell on her. It was a truly surreal experience, and they all instantly sensed that the visual aspect varied based on how Ryuko felt about you. But what did this mean?

There wasn't any time to think about that. She swallowed her hesitation and belted out, "Life-fiber-,"

**"-Synchronize! Kamui Saiban!"**

**"-Synchronize! Kamui Seijitsu!"**

**"-Synchronize! Kamui Nekketsu!"**

**"-Synchronize! Kamui Reiketsu!"**

~~~~~

High above the clouds, diminutive in the empty blue sky, a tiny black stealth fighter exploded from inside-out. Among the shards of shrapnel four glowing figures arced out – gold, turquoise, violet, crimson, speeding down faster than the rubble, streaking bolts with shining black blades at their points.

The plummet was essential. All that time spent planning, psyching themselves up with speeches and jokes, none of it was as important as those precious seconds as the still smoking guns of the enemy came into view. Dozens of battleships in tight formation both inside the caldera and around it, towering mecha of hunched, semi-humanoid form and sleek black plate armor wading through the water, flying Ultima Uniform models swarming about the bases. They saw it all in crystal clear focus.

It was impossible to think of anything else but this very moment.

Well, unless you were Nonon. Her eyes were glazed, focussed inward. What was wrong? Why couldn't she accept all of Ryuko's empowerment? It was extended to her, almost desperately. *Just take it! Like a human offering their arm up. Take it, this piece of me is yours. If that's what it will take to make things right between us.*

Saiban would have sliced it off eagerly if he could. But they needed to do it together. To describe the feeling to someone who hadn't worn a Kamui would be a challenge bordering on impossibility.

Holding your hand over a fire, knowing that if you could endure it the fear of the flames would never trouble you again. She just needed to relax, focus, and it would be done. But the ground was coming up too quickly.

**“SAIBAN HYOSHI!”** She yelled moments before impact, and just as quickly Saiban was in his alternate form, headphones over her ears, sound waves blasting from his pauldrons and coattails. Beneath her the crew of her target ship was oblivious, still waiting to see the fate of the decoy drones. With a single slap of her coattail their legs turned to jelly – a blast of perfect resonance shattering the deck into thousands of pieces. There was no time for them to feel fear, but crews of the nearby ships immediately panicked.

For the true believers the kamui were demons. Matoi, the anathema, had stolen and perverted pieces of the divine and granted them to the psychopathic killers in her cabal, twisting them into monsters that embodied all human sin. Even their nude appearance was a sign of how twisted they were, a human’s clothes could never be their skin, blasphemous! But if looking upon the divine Goddess Ragyo had been blinding, looking upon the kamui was *death*. And nothing could stop them.

But for the nonbelievers, the mercenaries and locals who’d signed up for money or security, it was maybe even worse. They’d backed the wrong side. And they were going to die.

All was fire and blood and pulses of light, leaping from ship to ship. For the wearers of the kamui they may not have been granted more acute senses like Ryuko, but they did seem to perceive things faster, or maybe slower depending on how you looked at it. And never more so than now.

It was bliss, sheer bliss to see a grand, skyscraper leveling howitzer with its barrel pointed right at you, and see the shell the size of a minivan inching towards you through the air and sidestep it with ease. Or if your feet were well planted on the ground let it explode harmlessly on you. Hell, why not slice it in half, grab it and throw it back, even jump up onto it and scramble on to the next. Have some fun with it!

A good half the fleet and defenses were in ruins in mere minutes. The soldiers of REVOCS couldn’t possibly react that fast, but before long a huge swarm of those glossy white drone bombers were on their tails, almost as fast as them. Now those, those could be a problem, the energy weapons they fired could eventually wear down a kamui’s defenses.

No matter. Nonon shouted **“SAIBAN MUBYOSHI!”** as she vaulted through the air and great sound negating blast stilled the air, causing all the drones to freeze. And no sooner did they freeze than did Aikuro loose a salvo of arrows faster than bullets that pierced them and killed the tortured animals that they used as power sources, and they wilted from the sky. In the stillness every move the Kamui made, not just the strike but drawing back the arm to strike, created a flat white clap of compressed air from the displacement. Tunnels carved ahead of them, clearing the way.

Then Uzu changed his target from the fleet and land based artillery to the mechs. Sure they had shoulder mounted cannons as well, but in huge arms that groaned as they lumbered forward they carried blades, maces, sharpened claws, implements of destruction designed to tear ships apart and sow terror among their crews. Uzu paused, perched on the listing bow of a slowly foundering destroyer, and admired the nearest one as it turned and lurched towards him. How was that even real? There was no expression in those glassy red viewing ports, but something about how the pilot guided its lumber (faster than you’d expect for something of that size) made him think he was taking a deep breath and muttering, “*Oh boy, here we go*”.

Bravery to be admired, but as his hardened life-fiber claws sunk towards Uzu he was already up on its arm, sprinting clear up to the domed, roughly head-shaped carapace. He pivoted around it in midair, landing a mighty kick on the other side of it the crumpled it and, imbalanced as it already was from its blow, the whole seven story monstrosity fell and impaled its legs on the crumpled bow of the ship.

It raised a hand to blast him with a bracer of wrist-mounted missile launchers, but Uzu was faster. One slash of his sword and the dull booming shockwave from it blasted clean down the arm, neatly bisecting it. Uzu chuckled with glee as the mech cringed in real seeming pain, and he felt Ryuko's exhilaration nearly as strong as Seijitsu's. He'd never been strong enough to do that before, and now crippled and without any defenses the mech was helpless as Uzu dropped onto its view ports. One, two, three slashes and they exploded beneath him. Houka had shown him the technical readouts of these things, how to beat them, and he knew that they came with quite a small crew. Just a pilot who worked it like an extension of his body, a couple crew mechanics, and ten or twenty poor captives in its belly used as a human power source. Propped up on the ship like this, the captives wouldn't fall into the water even as the pilot was immolated. This was why Uzu was the one who was assigned to take on these machines, he had the precision to hopefully save as many of them as possible.

"Now," Seijitsu's cape spun out into wings and they beat, carrying Uzu up high into the air, "If I had to pick one of you to be the leader here..." Now he had the mecha squadron's attention. Striding across the shallows and the ashy surface of Krakatoa, they moved to encircle him. Uzu leveled his blade at the largest one, with sloped black armor plates and a pulsating red glow. It stared intently back at him. **"You."**

"Uzu Sanageyama. So, you will be my adversary today. I must say I'm surprised, doesn't really suit you. I assume your girlfriend's pride got the best of her, then. It has to be her against Rosuketsu, even if you're clearly much more capable in a duel," A synthesized voice. No doubt, it was Takamori Kiryuin in there.

"Pride?" Uzu spat, "What do you know about pride? Y'know, I'd come back at you with something about overcompensating. But there's no point cracking jokes to a dead man."

"Chilling," Takamori said sarcastically. While they spoke the squadron had lined up railgun shots on Uzu, but he saw it coming a mile away. He barely seemed to move to dodge them, despite the targeting computers reading it as a guaranteed hit he just sort of phased between them. *[Now this is how it's done! Let's hurry up and take this fool's life-fibers so we can be this strong on our own!]*

Uzu dove towards Takamori and the force of their impact carved a tidal surge that exposed the seafloor in either direction, then crashed back down and caused the entire caldera to roil, foundering ships on the shores and throwing fire and explosions everywhere.

~~~~~

While Uzu met the towering warrior machines of REVOCS in battle, the missiles began to hit. With their flak curtain down the island strongholds were susceptible to full naval and aerial bombardment, and so the rest of Indonesia's liberation army moved in for the stranglehold. Aikuro and Tsumugu met up on the battlements of Rakata as the blasts began to fall. Well, meeting up gives the impression that they actually stopped moving, which wasn't true. More that their trails of destruction momentarily ran parallel.

“This. is. insane,” Aikuro said through his earpiece as he walked the bladed edge of his bow through a two-star cultist. “Looks like the kids have, uh, adapted well?”

Tsumugu grunted in agreement. They could see Uzu rebounding off the broken ships and through the carapaces of the mecha, trying to find an opening in Takamori’s defenses, and Nonon carving a path through the defenses on Verlaten in the distance, a little gold bolt of light that divided the part of the island that was charred and smoking from the as yet untouched. A wave of explosions from the fleet’s bombardment were creeping up behind her. She seemed to be moving slower than the other kamui and Nekketsu told Aikuro she sensed Saiban searching methodically for the enemy kamui.

“We’re doing fine, thanks for asking,” Tsumugu responded, blasting apart the skull of a huge hybrid predatory bird, almost the size of the one that had given Nonon so much trouble in her first battle, with a single bash from his bladed shield, “And it looks like the fleet’s coming in close. I doubt you’ll be bored guarding them.”

“Ohhh no. Want some help clearing a path to obelisk before our fifteen minutes are up?”

“You want to see it too, don’t you?”

“Of course!”

The shields might have been up around the core engine of the obelisk, but the blast doors of the multiple layers of the fortress were mere titanium. Their trail of destruction ended at the edge of the transparent red dome – sure they might have been able to eventually pry their way in, but they could sense a squad of three-stars on their trail, and they couldn’t handle both at the same time. The infantry were bringing up a special device, sort of a high tech battering ram, that could disrupt the field. So they remained on the wide peak of the battlements, dutifully destroying autoturrets that plinked harmlessly at them while panicked soldiers stampeded away.

“We’ve gotta see what’s in there,” Aikuro decided, leaping up over the shield dome to cling to the side of the obelisk. His eyes went wide, “*Oh no.*”

They’d had the coded schematics for the obelisks since the beginning, but the secret of their function was so carefully guarded that Shiro was still working on – apparently REVOCS taught that secret face to face to only its most loyal. Of course having a diagram of the thing was nothing compared to seeing it in person.

The core of each obelisk was a gigantic column of pure black lead, lumpy and rough, that on its own was already wider than the largest skyscraper and ten times taller. It hovered suspended between three metal struts, tied down by a web of life fibers that leapt between them in unnatural patterns, like an alien language. At their base they dug into the earth with jagged spikes, and between these a multilayered base of the same dingy metal that hid the ring shaped inner engine. This Aikuro was familiar with, but what he’d never seen before was, in the middle of this, a massive circular hole that had been carved hundreds of feet down down to the basalt bedrock. Its walls were covered in rusty sluices, whirring carving machines, and they dribbled with something red and chunky.

The bodies of thousands of former humans, those who had been enslaved and forced to build these towering machines, had been thrown into the hole. Even from a distance all that softening, putrefying flesh reeked, but that wasn’t why Aikuro’s eyes were watering.

There must have been thousands of them, wadding up together, impaled on spikes, slowly chugging into the industrial maws onto which they were thrown.

Tsumugu jumped up to see too, and soon enough he looked sick too.

~ “*There’s no doubt about it,*” ~ Houka said somberly, ~ “*The obelisks are harvesting bio-fuel from... the bodies.*” ~

Tsumugu remembered what Nonon told him, her theory that this battle wasn’t about those who rejected the life-fibers and those who embraced them, but those who would live side by side with them and those who would allow themselves to be conquered. If just a few drops of his own blood were enough to draw this strength out of Reiketsu, then all this was a whole different order of magnitude. And an unfathomable, unfathomable waste. That was what made Reiketsu sick more than the imagery (because why should dead human bodies disturb her). Every single one of those was another kamui that would never be brought to life, every drop of blood a battle that wouldn’t be fought.

“The only thing we can do now is make sure they didn’t die in vain,” Tsumugu concluded darkly.

~~~~~

Nonon finally found her enemy, or more accurately felt her. The more the battle heated up, the more the overpowering aura Saiban recognized built up on the smoking shores of the central island of Krakatoa. A tiny platform with some sort of... altar? And on that altar something not too different from a coffin, a steel tube traced and carved with elaborate sigils and connected to the ground by equally elaborate life support systems.

Nonon leapt from ship to ship and flitted lightly across the rough stones. She took a deep breath as she approached. Odd, the robed cultists around the alter saw her, made no move to run. *Guess this is our chance to finally get Ryuko under control.* But almost the moment she said it, a hiss of gas distracted her. The tube slid open and she saw a body clad in red and white rise from within. *Oh no. No not yet. No no no no!*

*I’m going to throw up.* She’d fought Rosuketsu twice before. The first time at the high security prison was with Ira and Houka. The second time on a forested mountain in Indonesia with Aikuro. They’d never managed to do more than force a retreat. And now she was alone. And the Kamui inhabiting a body that looked like nothing more than a blonde Satsuki was standing up. It *saw* her. And Ryuko was still pounding on her insides, a torrential force that every time Saiban attempted to relax and embrace it he reflexively seized up, blurring out all her senses except his aura perception and the music he was pumping into her headphones. It was a miracle she stayed upright.

*That thing is going to kill me.*

Maybe it was the music that saved her. It matched Saiban’s mood, and despite everything it wasn’t a horrible screeching like when she killed her brother. No, it was intense, pounding drums, a flying strings section, baritone and french horns drowning out everything, and a screaming electric guitar. A rock orchestra, the sort of thing that would come at the climax of the movie. Even though Nonon felt his fear on top of her own, he wasn’t licked before they even began. Everything around him, the roar of battle, the sulfur scent on the air, the stark purity of the volcanic stone and the lapping waves – this was the experience that made Earth worthwhile. What he had been waiting for.

*[Nonon, whatever you do don’t give up. I’ll drag you there if I have to.]*

She smiled despite herself. This wasn't going to be the end of her. And she didn't even look that much like Satsuki. Would killing her be cathartic at all?

~ *"Oh, I see, this must be why you've seen this kamui so rarely. The human body is too frail to support a kamui for long unless bonded to it, so it's been in suspended animation until it's needed. Fascinating, despite seeming to be the most powerful it's not exactly a front-line leader "* ~ Houka noted.

"Houka? Seriously? Now's not the time."

She leapt up onto the platform, facing the altar. The cultists were prostrating themselves before Rosuketsu. Nonon slew them with a few efficient slashes.

And now they stood face to face. Saiban in full combat form, glittering with the unnatural light of Ryuko's empowerment, Rosuketsu in its powered down form, a silky red and white kimono. It's black swords were crossed over Minazuki's chest, and she seemed still in slow motion as she lifted, hovering above the ground. There was something behind those eyes, Nonon couldn't tell if it was the woman or the kamui. But it was hateful.

And she could feel Ryuko's hate too. *You... Stay away from them!* If only Ryuko could be there in person she'd rip her limb from limb.

"Hello, interloper," Nonon was surprised. Rosuketsu spoke?

"Well well, you talk now, huh?"

It stared through her, "You have so far managed to evade our detection. Our understanding . But no matter. We shall pry the information from you."

Well that tone was chilling. Nothing like the indulgent sadism Junketsu showed when it possessed Ryuko, and even less of the human personality remaining. But hearing it speak somehow made it more comprehensible, less of a raw killing machine. "You'll have trouble with that when you're dead though, won't you?" She spat.

"You cannot save the humans. You must realize this is true. They are not your kind, in time you will see your folly."

"Uhh..." Nonon was confused, "What are you-."

*[She's not talking to you,]* Saiban realized, *[She's talking to Ryuko!]*

The aura from Rosuketsu was swelling, and so was the sinking feeling Ryuko. The light from Ryuko's empowerment was changing, billowing into a huge bright red backlight. The feeling of Ryuko in the pit of her stomach went from a solid insistence like a river on a closed damn to clawing. *Let me at her!*

"Another grave error was coming here. We shall destroy this child in front of you, and you shall know despair."

Saiban couldn't hold her back anymore. Nonon's skin went red and pulsing, like holding a finger over a flashlight except far more powerful, from a light source next to her heart.

**“AAAAAAAAGHAAAHAHAHAHAAAAA!”** The noise of Nonon and Saiban screaming in concert echoed all throughout the caldera. They were engulfed in flame, melting the entire altar to slag.

It was like the moment when Nonon first put on Saiban only in reverse. A hostile alien presence forcing itself to subject to her, molding itself to Saiban’s shape. This *couldn’t* be what the others had felt. Nonon didn’t even feel like she was alive anymore. Her mind was receding from her body, and it moved with an unbearable clarity as Rosuketsu took the opportunity to strike while Nonon was incapacitated. She blocked it, made to grab Minazuki’s throat, but she was still moving and darted away too fast. So Nonon stepped into the thrust and her extended hand became a punch, blowing Rosuketsu into the island and blasting a crater with perfectly smooth, sheer sides.

The feeling from Ryuko wasn’t sorrow, rage, focus, love. Sheer protective instinct literally coated Nonon’s skin. Far away, Rosuketsu got to its feet and began to transform.

Nonon didn’t feel the impact of Rosuketsu’s sword meeting hers, nor did she feel any shock from the punch. All she felt was the overwhelming force like a tidal wave rushing into her, Ryuko was empowering her with more than just a bit of her strength, she was pouring everything she could in. It was like some drug that hadn’t been invented yet, that made her feel like a hollow shell for the energy that was hers to command. Thin red sparks crackled between her fingertips.

But the only other thing that existed in Nonon was humiliation. Ryuko was *making* her accept this gift, and any impression that it was an apology was long gone. But Saiban’s music was still playing. This was the swell as the heroine overcame her inhibitions and set forth to destroy the villain.

*Can you hear me?* She wondered in her disturbingly detached mind. *Can you feel how wrong this is? I won’t let you forget it. But if this is how we win, I’m ready.*

**“I’M READY!”**

## Chapter End Notes

Also, in case you were wondering about this whole thing with Nonon battling a facsimile of Satsuki while actually being fighting Ryuko almost as much? Yeah, that’s been the plan from the start. Now I have to try to stick the thematic landing hooboy.

# Ring of Fire: Krakatoa: 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2067

~~~~~

The amphibious landing vehicles that were ferrying the infantry across the empty sea had complete armor casing from all angles so it was impossible for them to see where they were headed. And that was probably for the best, both for their protection and because if they could about half of them would have tried to turn back, inspiring speeches or no.

But they could hear it already, and that was bad enough. Booms, wooshes, metal scraping, the dull *BZZZZT* of railguns, the flashing pulses of kamui venting their power, other sounds for which the onomatopoeia had not been invented but which were plenty loud. The one saving grace that kept them from panicking was that all these horrific sounds were coming so fast and frequent that they all bled together into one giant roar that was easier to push to the back of one's mind.

Yuda couldn't, though. His position today was as frontline commander for the entire ground invasion – second only to the kamui and a few fleetmasters. He couldn't forget what was going on, he had to focus. And besides, he was also manning the turret on his landing craft.

*How the fuck did I get here?* He wondered to himself inanely as he watched the light show. The orange horizon, the dull black spikes of the foundering ships, the lurching shadows of the wading mechs, the tiny black swarms of fighter jets and bombers and flying ultima uniforms. Those infernos must have been towering, though the obelisks and the volcano's fuming smokestack dwarfed them.

*They're in there somewhere*, Yuda thought. He squinted, there was no way he could see them from here – oh nevermind, there they were. From this far away they were like firecrackers, colorful trails leaping so fast and arrow straight that they stretched hundreds of yards. There was the turquoise one, bouncing like a pinball between the mechs and the ships, occasionally shredding one and passing right through it. There was the violet one, zipping along the surface of an island occasionally disappearing into a bunker or darting around one place so quickly that it looked like it had exploded.

It made no sense that those could be people. People he knew. Look, that was Uzu leaping the height of a skyscraper in less than a second! And somewhere in the middle two red-gold trails clashed faster than lightning, coating the entire central island in a web of light. It reminded Yuda of those long exposure photos of traffic that turned the cars into mess of little beams, except it wasn't a two-dimensional image it was Nonon!

*But then they're from Honnouji. This is just normal to them.*

As the swarms of landing crafts closed in the crimson trail halted on the shore of Verlaten, sort of zipped back and forth, then launched through the air in a smooth, perfect arc. Yuda watched mesmerized as it drifted with supreme grace, drawing closer. *No way he's gonna make it*, He thought just as it was suddenly obvious that it was about to land right on him.



And before he could react Tsumugu was standing there, settling so lightly on the speeding boat that it didn't even shake. His whole body seemed to be wreathed in flames, white hot at their core but fading through deep red into burgundy wisps – the stuff was pouring out from the interlocking silver scale armor on his arms. Reiketsu's fleshy eyes, set like Senketsu's had been on broad spines on the front of each shoulder, seemed to be glowing

“Unreal,” Yuda murmured.

“**WHAT?**” Tsumugu couldn't hear him any better over the noise.

Yuda simply answered back, “HOW'S IT GOING?”

“**Heh,**” Tsumugu chuckled to himself, standing with his shield up and sword at the ready, not even bracing himself as though he stood on solid ground, “**I guess I finally get why even after we warned them Ryuko and Senketsu couldn't stop from evolving faster and faster. I hate to say it, but I think we might've been worried for nothing, eh Reiketsu?**”

*[Nothing at all,] She replied with deep satisfaction, [Although I do wonder how Saiban is holding up right now.]*

“UH, EVOLVING?” Yuda yelled back.

“ **Getting new forms. You'll see when we get in the artillery's range?**”

“IN RANGE? I THINK WE ARE IN RANGE! DIDN'T YOU TAKE OUT THE GUNS?”

“ **As many as we could. It's not us, it's the rearguard they're waiting for. They'll wait until all our landers are in range and not give any a chance to run.**”

Yuda didn't like the sound of that. There were thousands of the little armored amphibious vehicles behind him, and they've be lucky to get half that many to shore.

*BOOF!* The first howitzer fired. *BOOFBOOFBOOFBOOFBRRRRRRRRRR* . More and more came after and their flashes were visible across the battlefield. Try as he might there was no way Yuda could spot the incoming shells, but even over everything else he could hear them whistling. In the moment there was nothing to do but trust that Tsumugu would protect him.

“**I got 'em,**” Tsumugu said, and as Yuda watched Reiketsu began to shift around him. The spines for her eyes stretched and broadened, and underneath them her scale plates lifted and grew until Tsumugu's arms were coated in spines. The long red and gold loincloth about his waist stretched into points and dug into the armored hull. As he looked up into the sky, an eyepiece in the same silver and crimson of the rest of Reiketsu unfurled seemingly from nowhere over his face. Finally the vents along his back opened, but when Yuda looked inside there wasn't skin but instead holes into nowhere, seemingly infinite black space.

“What the-”

“**REIKETSU SENJUTSU (tactical) – SHIELD MODE**”

In the moment Tsumugu belted out the words thin black coils of silky smooth ribbonlike material leapt from every single one of those vents, the holes beneath the scales, the edges of Reiketsu's eye-spines, and the many pockets along the edge of the loincloth. There must have been thousands,

filamentous and so, so thin but yet also complete immobile even against the great force of the rushing wind and the boat's forward momentum. Yuda was baffled, the whole thing looked so unnatural.

Then the sky exploded.

**“HUT!”** Tsumugu grunted as everything went momentarily orange, then grey as the fire faded and a great dome shaped cloud of smoke hovered right above them.

“WHOA-HOHO!” Yuda yelped in exhilaration, and Tsumugu grinned.

**“Not bad, huh? Every single thread strong enough to stop a bomb all on its own!”**

*[Oh wow ! And before today I was just starting to get the feeling for one! This new power... it's like a, a catalyst. It's like she's showing me how! She's proud of me... ]*

Tsumugu grunted, **“I almost feel bad. We started out today furious with her... dammit Ryuko, you never make things easy do you?”**

“Huh?”

**“ Nothing. Get everyone ready to land. We'll begin on Verlaten!”**

*[Wait, wait,] Reiketsu interrupted, [It's been twelve minutes. Don't you think we should-]*

**“Good idea. Eyes-in-the-sky, what's Nonon's status?”**

Houka's voice came through ~ *“It's... interesting. Ryuko is flooding Saiban with an unbelievable amount of raw power. In her current state activity levels are so elevated that she vastly outstrips Rosuketsu. It's impossible for the enemy to lay a finger on her! But there's a problem.”~*

**“Unsurprising.”**

*“It seems, if I'm right, that there's some kind of conflict of instinct or something. Every time they go in for the attack something happens, and they can't seem to manage it. It's like Ryuko keeps trying to control Nonon directly, and she keeps rejecting it.”*

**“So she can't be killed, but she also isn't capable of ending the battle. Sounds like a perfect stalemate, which is enough to keep the Kamui off our back. That fulfills our tactical requirements.”**

~ *“Hmm, yes,”* ~ Houka said seriously, and Tsumugu knew exactly what he was thinking.

**“Yeah, I hope she sees it that way too.”**

~~~~~

Nonon knew exactly what her position was. And she couldn't stand it.

Only two things were real – herself and Rosuketsu. Everything else was ephemeral, as solid as tissue paper, not even useful as visual cover. Use her eyes? At this speed? Pointless, the only sense she could rely on was Saiban's aura sensing.

And in this blur of meaningless, slow motion objects they fought. Furious, impeccable form. Distance didn't matter, even from one side of the islands to the other could be crossed in a matter of seconds, leaping down upon each other with blades thrust forward with an accuracy that would seem impossible, creating shockwaves that hurled boulders with each blow. But those moments when they were separated by more than a few yards were rare, for it was at the focal point on Krakatoa that they danced an effortless ballet of destruction in close proximity, lethal blue-black blades dodged by mere hair's breadths and to observers it descended into a meaningless whirlwind of light and blades and debris. Compared to this, that first battle when Satsuki donned Junketsu was clumsy, crude. Two children tottering forward on their own for the first time, gently test their new capabilities. Now Kamui battles had truly reached their maturity.

And Nonon was doing none of it. Oh, sure, she was in control of her body, she thought as she dodged and parried with ease. But anyone could do that. That odd alien manner of fighting Rosuketsu had, at once stiff and chaotically fluid, had been so much trouble at first but now seemed so slow and predictable. Nonon's detached mind easily detected tells she never could have spotted before. It was true, extra power meant greater speed, perceiving the world in greater detail. With all this power anyone could survive against Rosuketsu. But then she would try to riposte, to capitalize on an opening with an acrobatic twist and a leap propelled by her coattails.

And she wouldn't twist. She wouldn't leap. Her coattails would hang lifeless, forgotten. And instead her hand would tighten into a fist and zoom right for Minazuki's face.

*No!*

Of course both Nonon and Saiban had the innate instinct to recoil. Theirs was a method of battle in which such a direct attack could only be a feint, where using superior flexibility and reflexes to phase through an enemy's defenses was the way to victory, not battering them down. So they flinched, just for a fraction of a second, but long enough that the opportunity to attack was gone.

And each time Ryuko's face, smiling an open, friendly smile – not even smug or gloating – passed through their minds. And they burned with impotent humiliation. They weren't even in control of their own body! Already Nonon was regretting saying that she was ready for this. Who even cared if they won the day, they weren't doing anything. Just like Minazuki they were puppets.

*And she doesn't even think she's doing anything wrong !* They thought. Usually in battle there was no time to think, but with their minds so far away, receding from themselves, there was nothing else to do but think. The autonomous action that moved hands and legs wasn't theirs anymore. *She thinks she's helping us. Protecting us!*

*And this isn't going to end. It's always been this way. When Satsuki gained the power to fight against Ragyo it was because Junketsu had been blended with Senketsu's life-fibers. When she became Kisaragi Ryuko took our Goku Uniforms – all we had to do was sit back let her take care of it. And Satsuki's betrothal party – she completely stole the show. People were **bowing** to her! They thought of all the times Ryuko trained with them before the other Kamui were made, how much love she put into her Kamui. Yet when push comes to shove she takes over your body, who cares about all that training. Hell, it was all so we could get to the part that matters for her, she just made us more effective puppets. Without even trying.*

As they got lost in thought, their body actually seemed to do *better* . Her body didn't know how to use advanced techniques now, but with raw ability she was still untouchable. Rosuketsu's eyes bored with laser intensity, Saiban's were glazed and trance-like. The realization that conscious

effort only made things worse sunk like lead in their bellies. But in the time it took for them to think *It's fine, I'll just shut off and let her take care of it*, there were five more openings to attack, five more flinches. Five more times that monster should have been dead! And five more insistent little probes from Ryuko. *What's wrong?* She was asking with the panicked insistence of a babysitter watching a kid crying, completely incapable of understanding the cause.

*You know what's the worst thing too? It's **got** to be this way. The path to a future of living alongside life-fibers is through her. Of course it is, at least for as long as she's the only one of her kind. She can't be beaten, and she's on our side But... we can't accept that.*

*We didn't kill our own brother just to get the credit stolen in the end.*

And so, over seconds that dragged on in battle until they became hours of human time, the resolution grew. *That's it then. I guess if the choice is between being her puppet and... nothing, then after today we'll be done. We'll step down. And someone else will replace us.*

Ryuko couldn't tell exactly what they were thinking. But maybe she could feel that cold dead feeling of any sense of ambition and aspiration dying. What did she understand? Could she realize from this blunt connection what an existential death this was for them? All they knew was that she just became more insistent, more contrite. Like spears of energy pushing Saiban up from within. *Accept my goddammit! Just let me help you ! I'm sorry already!*

Suddenly, ~ *"Nonon, one minute until the trial is done! Please give Ryuko your decision as soon as possible!"* ~ Houka said.

Nonon snapped back to reality with a gasp, suddenly altering her trajectory as she rebounded off a battleship and skidding down it, creating a deep rivet of screeching metal and crashing to the ground. Rosuketsu was on her, and on they danced on the blackened rubble of Krakatoa. That's right, the trial run! She could end this, end the humiliation, and all she had to was say the word.

"I... I haven't..." She managed.

~ *"What! Nonon you gotta tell her yes!"* ~ It was Uzu, nobody else would be so impolite, ~ *"I can't kill this guy without her help!"* ~

~ *"We're about to make landfall. If I can't use my new form to it's full potential I won't be able to cover the entire force from bombardment,"* ~ Tsumugu said.

~ *"Nonon please..."* ~ Aikuro agreed. ~ *"Don't – this is too important for your pride to get in the way."* ~

"Pride..." She didn't have it in her to respond with anger. The music Saiban was playing was swelling, the percussion pulsing like a ticking clock. The chorus swelled. Decision time!

~ *"Ten seconds."* ~

~ *"Nonon..."* ~ Uzu growled testily. She could hear the sound of his sword scraping on metal armor through his earpiece.

The music was pounding in her ears, Rosuketsu presence beating in from all around her, Ryuko billowing up from within. Nothing about either of those creatures was remotely human. Destructive forces as raw and dispassionate as the volcano beneath her feet, and she was their battleground.

*Accept me! I'm sorry!* Ryuko didn't seem to have any idea of what was fast approaching. She felt the same as before. Everything in her just screamed, *I must protect you and kill this thing. Nothing else matters!*

What choice did she have?

~ “Nonon! Does she stay, yes or no?” ~

“Yes!”

In a flash Houka's voice went from urgent to his usual detached tone, ~ “*Good copy. She's received the signal*” ~ (This being a simple light that would flash green or red in the lab, which Ryuko was watching with one part of her vast true form).

Nonon blew out a huge sigh. This was how it had to be. Now she could just let the rest of the day's events run their course.

And then Ryuko's presence vanished.

## Chapter End Notes

Ugh, sorry it took so long. I will try to get on with the next one quickly, but we'll see. Quarantine is hard on me I have to be honest (oddly having a ton of free time makes you value it less, I dunno) and I really didn't like the first version of this one. So I wiped it and came back.

There's still a lot in here I'm not sure I like. Using bold for people who are talking while empowered. Nonon and Saiban's internal monologue. It's not a question of content but of execution.

Also I didn't really mean to leave it on a cliffhanger but better to release what I had now.

## Ring of Fire: Krakatoa: 4

April 2067

~~~~~

There was no experience in Nonon's life (or Saiban's for that matter) that the sensation of that moment could be compared to. As the unearthly presence vanished Nonon was simply snapped back to reality.

But her initial reaction was panic. How, how could Ryuko defy her orders *now*, when she was agreeing to exactly what she wanted! Was this some kind of game to her? Nonon alighted nimbly on the blasted rubble, without a sound from her dainty heels. Her eyes and Saiban's flitted around for their enemy, and before she could blurt something into her earpiece the sudden doubt hit her. Did she subconsciously say no to Ryuko, expressing her true desire despite herself? She certainly had felt so detached that she could have. No, no that couldn't be.

Rosuketsu landed in the near distance, much less daintily. The ground cracked beneath Minazuki's feet, lacy flowing sleeves spread furiously, and the ruby-red ibex horns on Minazuki's head rose glinting in the sun-dappled smoke. Those yolky orange eyes on Rosuketsu's pauldrons stared forth with empty rage. But it didn't move, instead standing there with its two short swords at the ready. If Nonon didn't know better she would think it was confused.

But for the moment she just thought that she needed to figure out what had gone wrong, tell Houka to bring Ryuko's empowerment back before Uzu and Tsumugu and Aikuro lost their shit, and possibly their lives. Rosuketsu was a dangerous distraction, stabbing her with a primal fight-or-flight response. But she saw something out of the corner of her eye that turned all this panic into confusion.

Oh, well there was Uzu still wreathed in the flames of Ryuko's empowerment.

Then she heard Aikuro blow a huge breath of relief, ~ ***"Thanks commander. You made the right call on this one."*** ~ The others agreed, but since they were in battle their responses were monosyllabic (whereas Aikuro was leaping from landing craft to landing craft to regroup with the main fleet).

And so Nonon was left to gasp as she realized Ryuko's empowerment had indeed been retracted, but only from her. Panic time was over, soon to be replaced by confusion, but at that exact moment all she had time to think was, *Oh, it's fine! Everything is fine!* and then *Oh shit!*

Because without any warning Rosuketsu surged towards her, swords pincering towards Nonon's chest and belly for a swift killing blow. A blow that, despite being precise and extremely difficult to block, Nonon managed to turn with a deft one-two of *Kiba's* twin blades. She certainly didn't look composed doing it, yelping in surprise, but maybe the fact that she managed it at all perturbed Rosuketsu because it wasn't there for Nonon's retaliation. Instead it darted back, as though that lethal strike had been merely probing, and resumed its stone-still vigil as though it hadn't moved at all.

Then it spoke through Minazuki, "So, you have foresaken your offspring. You understand that this is unusual for your kind. Likely this explains that you have survived to be the last. Development of

such behavior... highly unusual. But now that your identity as an interloper is understood it is no matter,” Both pairs of Rosuketsu’s eyes turned directly towards Uzu, dancing across the water, “There are others.”

Once again it had to be speaking to Ryuko, Nonon concluded. It sounded like pure nonsense, but she made sure to remember it. Everything suddenly stood out so boldly, so real, that inevitably her curiosity was piqued. Her kind? As far as Nonon knew Ryuko was the only one of her kind. And why would it say she was the last? Nonon knew that the life-fibers came from some other dimension, quite possibly filled with other sorts of beings that were totally alien to humanity. Was it possible it had mistaken Ryuko for one of those? It seemed to specifically want to kill one of the kamui she’d created while she was “watching”, trying to inflict despair on her. And Nonon couldn’t possibly fathom why.

Nonon shocked herself with how much she really, really wanted to know. But how else was she supposed to feel? Almost the moment Ryuko’s presence left Nonon became amazed – this was an actual alien sentience she was facing down, far more than the Kamui, Ryuko, hell even Ragyo or Nui, and the COVERS couldn’t talk. Even when Ryuko had been possessed by Junketsu there was clearly a lot more of Ryuko in there than this, just a more sadistic Ryuko. Not that Nonon really thought this through – there wasn’t time – but this was an alien speaking Japanese, saying the sorts of nonsense an alien would naturally say.

And that was kind of amazing.

In fact Nonon hesitated, waiting to see what Rosuketsu would do next, and was so prepared for another attack she jumped when Rosuketsu abruptly lifted off the ground and sped off through the air, flying directly towards Uzu.

“Wha-hey!” Nonon shouted indigantly as it zoomed past her. She heard Houka warn Uzu about the incoming threat, but wasn’t really worried about him. With Shingantsu he could anticipate every attack, so the worst that would happen was a stalemate. But Rosuketsu was her target!

All thoughts of quitting, of riding this out were gone. Saiban’s soundtrack was pulsing, a single scratching violin that ticked over synth chords that were fluid and resonant like rushing wind, backed up by a distant chanting and occasional plucking at a harp in light, feathery strains. A sparse, unconventional composition, but with a tension like it was building to something.

With that faint pulse and this newfound feeling of freedom Nonon saw the battlefield as though for the first time. All those objects and war machines that had been ephemeral to her before were so vivid, so breathtaking, that Nonon felt guilty she hadn’t taken the time to appreciate it before.

It was a frozen, sublime moment, and Nonon tried to take it all in, memorize every detail of the panorama. The largest battle she’d taken part in so far in her life, something she’d tell her children about one day, she hoped.

And if a part of her thought that it was just her Kamui that made her feel that way, just her conditioning from Honnouji that made all this glorious, then another equally large part of her thought, *And what’s so wrong with that? This is who I am. I haven’t fulfilled my dream of conducting my own orchestra, but this orchestra of death will do just fine.* The reverberations of the cannon fire which she could feel across her skin seemed to be in sync with the music Saiban was piping in her ears.

It was only a couple seconds though, and she said to Saiban, “So, what the hell do we think happened?”

*[I was hoping you'd have an idea,]* Saiban reached deep into himself, trying to recall the last incorporeal link between himself and Ryuko. Like everything she had done it had happened as quick as a half-forgotten thought, and the impression was vague and hard to interpret, but it felt like Ryuko was... taken aback. She'd really expected Nonon would reject her at the earliest chance she had, and now seeing that it hadn't really been an option she felt guilty. Really guilty – before she certainly *seemed* sorry, but since she hadn't broken up with Satsuki Nonon knew she didn't really feel any guilt for her actions themselves, she was just upset they had consequences. But this was different, after everything Nonon still trusted her, she hadn't been kidding when she said they were on the same side despite personal enmity. Wasn't Ryuko an inconsiderate asshole for thinking so little of her, wasn't she the small-minded and petty one? She'd badly misjudged Nonon, and if that was true maybe she didn't need her protection either. That was what she felt as she retracted, physically rebuffed as though scalded.

Nonon couldn't help but feel vindictive glee. That's fucking right, she *knew* when she decided to go along with their relationship that Ryuko would never have done it in her place. And now Ryuko knew it too. This was far more satisfying than any insult she could have slung because it wasn't just telling her how much of a piece of shit she was, it was proving that she was *better* than Ryuko.

*[Sounds like our poster-girl just realized that we've sacrificed far more for the cause than she,]* Saiban summarized succinctly.

Nonon chuckled, “Oh, I wonder if she even realized she had a cause. Y'know it's funny, I think I finally really get what Satsuki meant when we were leaving and she said, ‘what I want doesn't matter’. She's been sacrificing for the sake of humanity all her life, and I guess she finally let it slip a bit. Maybe what she wanted to do all along was totally fucked up, but at least I get *that* about her,”

Just imagining that, Nonon felt closer to Satsuki than she had in months. She'd been fighting with these deviant urges, keeping them under wraps so she could do what had to be done, and while that didn't make her right the comparison to the stupid, self destructive urge Nonon had to let slip the truth about her and Ryuko wasn't hard to make. And if that was the case, the void in Nonon's mind into which any grasp of who Satsuki was had closed. She had just the same debauched as any other Kiryuin but had managed through sheer willpower to paper over it because there were more important things to be done. And that was almost, *almost* worth a little respect.

*[But she was wrong.]*

“How so?”

*[What we want and what needs to be done for the cause aren't contradictory. What was it that you set out to do, way back when this all began?]*

Oh yes, Nonon had almost forgotten, “To duel and beat Ryuko at her full power and prove that I'd mastered wearing you. Yeah, I get your drift. You need to absorb a lot more life-fibers if we're gonna finish that.”

*[And that's a lot more life-fibers flying away from us right there,]* Saiban finished. Nonon grinned eagerly. Flush with pride from her moral victory over Ryuko, Nonon's confidence soared. This wasn't her final battle, the end of the story, this was a dance number! A light show in the middle



devoid of any dramatic stakes. Saiban's music swelled, a pounding beat and building chorus dripping with slowly building excitement.

"Too bad there's no way to catch up to it before it gets to Uzu," Nonon tutted, crouching down to spring to the nearest wrecked battleship.

Saiban groaned, *[Well I'm done with it! I'm through not having such a basic transformation. I'll find a way!]*

"But we've been over this, your thrusters just don't have the lift to fly," Nonon protested, not wanting to waste any more time.

*[ I know, but what if – bear with me – what if I've been thinking about this all wrong?]*

~~~~~

Uzu was keeping a close eye on Rosuketsu's approach – it was taking more than an instant because he was fighting in the bay on the other side of the central island, right between Verlaten and Lang. Well, maybe not quite an eye, he was using those on the two mechs he was fighting. To an outside observer it might seem like Tenganstu wouldn't work on a mechanical enemy, but even they had tells, and even then what Uzu was born with wasn't the ability to predict moves in combat but eyes with abnormally rapid movement. In theory that worked on anything, and though it came with a healthy degree of epileptic photo-sensitivity he'd trained that out of himself before he even went to Honnouji. He didn't *need* it, but if he kept his eyes whoever he was fighting they could never hit him.

But he had faith in his Shingantsu, had faith when it said that faint distortion in the air was a human shape with flowing sleeves and shiny smooth pearl shaped pauldrons flying streamlined and rippling right towards him. He was looking for the other one, the one that would be Nonon, traveling along at sea level right behind it.

So he was pretty surprised when instead there was a flat clap of compressed air over on Krakatoa and then a second distortion, this one a smaller human body with long, sharp spines rising from its shoulders and voluminous fan shaped tail, blasting through the air – *flying* right behind Rosuketsu.

**"What the?"** He whirled around in midair, Seijitsu's cape molded into wings that pounded the smoke. A bus-sized mech sword crashed down towards him and even as he spoke he turned it with a careful slice behind his back. **"Is that... Nonon? Houka explain!"**

~ "It certainly is – how remarkable, look at Saiban!" ~

What Uzu's Shingantsu told him he confirmed with his own eyes. Saiban had indeed transformed, in some ways one step beyond his *Hyoshi* form but yet also completely different. His shoulder plates had grown two sets of huge prongs, thin and parallel like tuning forks, and they vibrated with a smooth buzzing noise. His coattails had spread even further into a beautifully silky fan, run through with rigid beams that stabilized it behind her, keeping everything waist down stable. Same with the gauntlets, which spread out into bladed fins from Nonon's wrists. And rather than expand, the jet vents on the back of his shoulder plates had closed up, and the ones that ran down Nonon's back had shifted, moved down to her hips where they vented gently for stabilization.

"AAAHAHAHAHA! WHOO-HOO!" Uzu could hear Nonon shouting with glee, along with pounding music. Apparently the speakers on his plates and tail were still working, a base drum

pounded and the great swelling of the orchestra rose with her.

**“ But how? She’s just floating!”**

~ “No! It’s not floating at all! The resonance of those tines on Nonon’s shoulders is so powerful it creates a vacuum above her body, and so the air coming in from below bouys her, the same way a jet engine works! Oh, it’s so much more sophisticated than Senketsu’s rocket propulsion! And what’s more, and I – I just can’t believe my data’s correct, I need your eyewitness, but it looks like **she’s dropped Ryuko’s empowerment?**”

**“What? Wait holy shit you’re right!”** Uzu shouted, still fighting on and watching Takamori’s looming black mech draw closer (he hadn’t yet found an exploitable weakness in his armor so he was playing cat and mouse with Takamori while picking off his minions).

**“Can you repeat that?”** Tsumugu hollered, deafening gunfire coming through his earpiece.

**“No-ho way! Well, if she managed a new form without any outside help, looks like we gotta keep! Nekketsu, what say we clear the skies, huh?”** Aikuro added. He was landing at that moment on the bow of the vanguard battleship, where soldiers were taking cover from barrages of artillery and bombs, but even as these fell all around the true strength of Nekketsu’s shock absorption was revealed as despite the blows rocking the ship and leaving dents the size of bathtubs in the titanium-clad deck Aikuro held firm and sent arrows though enemy aircraft with deft accuracy. Even shells exploding right on his back couldn’t shake them, and the fleet inched ever closer under his steel cloud.

Even from that distance he could hear the thumping of the percussion from Nonon’s speakers. He could only wonder what the soldiers thought about that, hope it filled them inspiration and the enemy with confusion.

~~~~~

Nonon caught up to Rosuketsu with *Kiba* thrust forth and her body coiled around it like a knight’s lance. Her head was spinning from how high up they were, the sheer thrill of watching the shiny red Kamui get larger, the edges of her vision blurring, burning. It was *indescribable* joy.

And when Rosuketsu dodged, as Nonon suspected it would, she stopped – instantly, no skidding halt of momentum just a great lurch in her belly as she went from moving to hovering. Oh, how she’d missed that roller-coaster feeling, that topsy-turvey distortion of balance that even now made her feel like a kid again. And she wrapped a hand around Rosuketsu’s ankle and hurled her down with such speed and force that the battleship it hit cracked in two. Then Nonon dove after it, rolling and zigzagging so that when o rebounded back up they met together, blades clashing in a flurry as they descended once more and struck the ship, skidding along it with a horrid metallic screech.

Rosuketsu’s eyes flamed with fury, and Nonon shouted at it, “Still not talking to me, huh? You think I’m just a minion? Not worth speaking to? You’ll see what a mistake it was turning you back on me, I’m your real enemy, not Ryuko!”

And they lunged at each other yet again. On this time Nonon didn’t flinch and fought *her* way. From a mere parry she could slide herself across *Kiba*’s length until she practically vaulted over Rosuketsu for a kick, slash, tail slap, and when that was parried she could dodge just barely out of the way with a well timed sway of her hips until her pale, soft little fingers with their scarred tips

were crunching down on Rosuketsu's wrist with mountain-shattering force. They twisted through the air, rebounded off the ground, shattered the clouds and tore deep frothing holes in the sea.

In their first encounter Rosuketsu's alien fighting style, at once controlled and ferocious, seemed impossible to beat. So unpredictable, so efficient, there were no openings, every strike was optimized so that any possible block or dodge could do nothing but lead an opponent into the next strike. What had changed even Nonon couldn't be sure, but somehow after seeing it from that detached perspective she and Saiban were finally beginning to understand it. Mathematically optimized though it was, it was plain to see that each individual flurry, each combo operated on its own without the sense of larger game plan that a truly great human swordsman could bring. Satsuki or Uzu would wear you down, develop habits that an enemy might think they'd learned then suddenly change them, play the mind game that lived in those tiny delays and moments where the spacing, the positioning of blades seemed messy – but was it really? There was an oh-so-subtle difference between a fighting style meant to win a sword duel and one meant to kill, and Nonon had found it.

And what's more she could exploit it. With Rosuketsu when it was forced to react that's all it did, reacted. It wasn't picking up her habits in that sort of crude, intuitive way the brain worked in battle, it wasn't thinking several steps ahead – in fact it didn't seem to be thinking at all, just executing. This was a fighting style meant to kill humans who fought according to some kind of conventional rule, and in this realm her frenetic, unpredictable, dancing way of doing battle was an edge of surprising usefulness. *Kiba* seemed at times to be more stationary than she was, as she twisted and slithered around it using every one of her limbs (including her tail) as a weapon. She danced and rocked her body and nodded her head back and forth with a melody Saiban composed on the fly, slashed and stabbed with the beat, changed her angle of attack as the chord changed, and somehow this was far better than any verbal communication. They fought as one, and even though without empowerment Rosuketsu was stronger and faster Nonon held it at bay marvelously, though she couldn't acknowledge that herself there was no time. And besides in the midst of battle whether you're fighting well or not is completely immaterial, unknowable. It can only be determined by the outcome.

To an observer not versed in the art of Kamui battling it was a nearly incomprehensible sight to behold. Even if you could see the speed at which it operated the idea that they could aim blows so true over thousands of feet of rushing sky made no sense. But even more amazing than that when they met and whirled right next to each other for more than an instant the styles of both were so kinetic, so full of movement that a common conception of a sword fight as playing out mostly linearly with opponents pushing each other backwards and forwards had to be completely discounted. They seemed to step *through* each other, to occupy the same space with their blades rather than clashing, and would lead an observer to wonder at almost every moment how the hell that strike *didn't* hit them. If it could have been recorded, it would quite certainly have been the most remarkable thing any viewer had ever seen. And Nonon loved every moment of it. Probably. More like the true bliss was not being able to, not needing to question such things at all.

*This* was what it meant to be one with your Kamui. This was what it meant to be alive.

~~~~~

While the battle raged Mataro remained safe as he could in the comms room of the flagship. Illuminated only by screens, surrounded by technicians who frantically relayed troop reports and replied with orders, with his blindfold on (and yes, even now he kept it on) all he could do was listen and learn.

Which was really fine. Usually it would annoy him to be shoved to the side, but honestly this time... well it was fair enough, he really didn't want to be anywhere near the action. It was only escalating minute by minute. Besides, Nonon had been treating him a lot more fairly since she'd kind of adopted him as her errand boy while recovering from her berserker wounds. If she thought it was more worthwhile being here than just staying home he had to agree.

Man, it was complicated though. All these codes and so much information to keep track of. Where was the enemy, what type was this particular squad fighting, should they send reinforcements? Each of the comms officers was so busy keeping track of their own little squads that it was impossible for any of them to focus on the bigger picture.

But Mataro could. Even though it made his head spin and he knew for sure after just a few minutes of sitting there in the dark listening that he never wanted to deal with this again, he could pick out a trend. He listened to reports of militias composed mostly of the local recruits and some mercenaries getting pushed off the beaches, of wolf-rats and some other less threatening hybrid beasts being unleashed in packs. Something felt weird about it. It made his skin prickle with a primitive instinct he knew well, one of the most essential of pickpocket's instincts. It was that sort of creepy feeling, the sting in the back of your neck that came while shoplifting when the clerk was onto him, trying to pretend they weren't, but hadn't made their move. *Yet.*

"It's too easy," He concluded to himself (he was sitting in a corner, nobody was paying attention to him). It seemed wrong, this whole operation was being lead by four tactical geniuses, so he wanted to tell himself he was just being stupid. But still... "It feels like a trap."

## Ring of Fire: Krakatoa: 5

April 2067

~~~~~

In the first twenty minutes of the battle the Kamui devastated the REVOCS defenses. Ships foundered, their decks blasted clean save for a few struggling bodies lingering between life and death. Mechs propped up and smoking, great grey pillars around which their brethren were forced to navigate. Steaming vortexes in the sea where planes and drones had fallen. Huge scars ripped through the concrete walls and the artillery batteries were nonexistent. Smoke filled the air and wreathed around the bases of the obelisks.

But in spite of this the battle would rage on for several hours more, for though it was indeed true that the Kamui had wrecked paths of destruction broad and terrible that was not to say that they had made it inevitable that the REVOCS forts fell. Rather that before a conventional military could never have taken them, and now things were just slightly in their favor.

And that was how things down on the beachhead were, as a thronging mass of soldiers and DTRs surged forth behind Tsumugu.

There hadn't been much a beach before on Rakata, the concrete of the first layer of battlements plunged sheer into the ocean on all sides, but Tsumugu had torn that down to make rough, rubble shores that the armored hulls of the landing crafts scraped on as their treads engaged, hauling them up even as a hail of bullets and rockets from the second battlements attempted to dislodge them. Crawlspace gates opened and unleashed packs of wolf-rats and horrible gnawing hybrid beasts made from moles. Near the size of a man, these rolling balls of greasy fur with incisors smooth and wide were the first thing the soldiers saw as the blast doors fell and they rushed out. But they saw dozens of them pop on Tsumugu's sword and held their ground, putting hundreds more out of their misery with a torrential hail of gunfire.

Then the advance guard of one-star wearing mercenaries, grimly set to their business, clambered over the bodies of the corrupted animals where they piled and fired down upon the soldiers with automatic shotguns. That might have been it right then and there – by now the landers could force themselves up no farther and new arrivals were forced to wade between the metal hulls to a shore quickly crowded, but again fighting against a Kamui was like fighting the tide. Reiketsu's Senjutsu form with its ribbons of life-fibers like some kind of horrible sea urchin whipped through them, impaling many from hundreds of yards or away and knocking plenty more into walls or the sea with bone shattering force. And those who were spared that fate were surprised by the ferocity of the attack from the soldiers – usually needle guns used pneumatic power to fire their ammo so that the life-fibers would be negated but the human underneath unharmed, but not today. These new heavy duty needle rifles used plain old gunpowder, because prisoners just weren't a priority today.

And maybe that hammered home to the mercs that they weren't messing around anymore because they panicked and ran, but the walls of the second battlements were just as sheer as the first and the doors had been sealed. So they ran along the first level (the fortresses were designed as a series of concentric rings) and headlong into a battalion of local recruits coming to reinforce. And these men, who weren't true believers in the cause and not even real warriors, took one look at the normally rough and ready mercenaries running for their lives and screaming that they were using

real bullets this time and turned and ran with them. The battle for the Rakata beachhead became a rout.

But without Tsumugu's presence, keeping his pace slow and walking the ordinary human soldiers through every obstacle, this utter victory with less than a dozen casualties wouldn't have been possible. Only with great difficulty could the army alone have forced its way ashore, trading lives for every inch won and staring down the horrors of REVOCS technology, perverted nature, and merciless killers. But instead they saw Tsumugu striding forward undaunted, Yuda right behind him waving the flag of the reconquest (White with a red circle like the Japanese flag, but with a simplified version of the Indonesian coat of arms in the center), and further away Uzu taking on mechanical colossi like something from a movie and in the far distance the shining purple beacon of Aikuro shepherding the fleet. And above them – how could they miss it – Nonon and Rosuketsu tore through the sky, shredding the smoke and clouds with sonic booms and then collapsing into the sea in frothing columns of water hundreds of feet high. Their hearts will filled with magnificent glory, purging fear. This was a battle of legends, and they would play their part however small. To die here in the service of these gods incarnate was not so bad a fate.

~~~~~

Meanwhile Takamori had finally caught up with Uzu, coming up behind him while he was surrounded by five other mechs. Despite his every effort to slice Uzu down with his segmented sword the length of a ship, he had to watch Uzu scramble along the shoulders of each of them and cut them down to size, removing limbs and blasting through exposed wiring until the only thing that was left above the seafoam was their torso with the human fuel sources imprisoned inside them.

~ *"Well, I must admit Sanageyama you are a hard man to catch"* ~ Takamori's mech boomed out, tinny and metallic.

**"There's no point trying! I can do this all day you know,"** Uzu replied, blinking past the sword and cutting a series of chains in the arm of Takamori's mech. Distressingly, the life fibers running through the circuitry turned the metal tendons molten, remolding them into their unbroken state. **"You might as well just surrender, save your men. Even you must appreciate that. Because you'll never hit me."**

~ *"Oh I agree,"* ~ Takamori said as menacingly as his artificial voice could. ~ *"However,"* ~ And without warning his free hand plunged down towards Uzu, bulky serrated fingers at the ready. Uzu effortlessly dodged it, of course, but then -

With a horrible screeching of metal Uzu watched as the gigantic metal hand crunch clean through one of the destroyed mechs. There was a frozen moment where he watched, and Seijitsu almost lost control of his wings in panic.

*[No! I-we- he **didn't** !]* Just moments ago she'd been on top of the world, having a blast fighting, claiming more life-fibers, enjoying the rush of being stronger than she ever had before. It wasn't really her way to think about why the "bad guys" were the bad guys – combat was a part of life and there had to be someone to fight for that. You could even respect them from time to time if they fought well. But turning to hostages – *cheating* – just because you couldn't win outright? Who did that? She knew Uzu thought she was hopelessly naive for that, but she also knew that deep down he believed it too. She reminded him of how he was before Ryuko humbled him, all that mattered was

throwing down against powerful opponents. And that he wanted to protect her from this rude awakening.

Kind of hard to do when Takamori's fist rose from the broken mech as though hatching from an egg, coated in red slime and chunks. You could see the malicious glee in the giant robots hunched posture, taunting.

**“BASTARD!”** Uzu shouted, blood roaring in his ears. Takamori raised his giantic sword towards another of his fallen comrades, but before it could fall Uzu was between them, his katana and all Seijitsu's strength just enough to block the titanic force. **“FORCE OUR HAND WILL YOU?”** Before Takamori could react, he had zoomed down to grasp a finger and with a tremendous howl of exertion hurled the entire multi-story machine of his head, over the broken mech, to land on its back in the water with a splash so huge it exposed the seafloor before the water came rushing back in, **“NOW IT'S REALLY ON!”**

Far above Nonon and Rosuketsu wheeled through the sky, dashing back and forth vertically, breaking the sound barrier every time they stopped to turn. It was fortunate for Nonon that Saiban's headphones already protected her ears, otherwise her eardrums would have become pulp. As it was, the bliss of airborne combat and her beautiful battle orchestra were the only things on her mind, and so she barely noticed that their combat was edged into the space where Uzu and Takamori were dueling – now really dueling, sword to sword – until they were almost on then.

She skidded to a brief halt on the deck of a sinking aircraft carrier, finding herself right alongside Uzu. Of course he knew she was coming, and when Rosuketsu shunted along the deck, slicing through the command bridge for a surprise attack he saw that coming too, and without missing a beat his Katana split into two and one half leapt between Nonon's legs and the other past her shoulder, perfectly blocking the Kamui's attacks while she flipped over him and – also not missing a beat – kicked the side of Takamori's sword to knock it off course so that it sliced clean through the ship instead of his head. As it did and everything around exploded, the side of the ship Uzu was standing on was sent sailing up, and he used the catapulting momentum to land a rising knee square to Rosuketsu's jaw sending it sailing back in an arc. In the same instant Nonon was landing and sliding down the now sloping neck, shoving off just right to intersect Rosuketsu's arc with a strike it *just barely* blocked before separating.

And now Nonon and Uzu landed, back to back, and saw their enemies looming on either side. Uzu's momentary rage vanished as he felt Saiban's beat wash over him, reminding him that there was nothing they couldn't do together.

**“Hey,”** He breathed.

“Hey,” Nonon responded with a giggle, and that was all that needed to be said.

And so for a time they fought together – though side by side wasn't the right word as their battle spanned great distances. Despite that their synchronicity couldn't be denied, and they sung through the air and across the sea, the two shearing blades of a scissor that dueled Rosuketsu, blasted past the crushing blows from Takamori, traded roles so quickly they fought like a single four-armed beast (that also had a tail and a pliable cape with a mind of its own).

Nonon felt, if she felt anything at all, lucky in a way there was no putting into words. This was the real Uzu, any ordinary day he would be some level of a moron, but here he really came alive. His perfectly toned body twisted with a graceful, fae lightness that no other male warrior Nonon had ever seen could match, encroaching on Rosuketsu with a precise, sleek ferocity and perfection of

every stance and form that – well, *she* couldn't do that! And through it all that irrepressible glint in his grey eyes and that too-wide smile shone with feral fun and she knew every move he would make before he made it.

This was a special sort of closeness, something Nonon was sure was reserved for – well, for their very exclusive class of people. Fighting as one with your Kamui and each other. Personal quarrels, the obligations of life, those were just distractions.

*This is love*, Nonon thought deliriously in those few instants where she could think, *Only love can do this!*

In Uzu's head, no surprise, the calculus was simpler. Shingantsu relied on focus and a clear head, so he had plenty of time to admire the petite sensuality of her every move, and to think back about how far she'd come as a fighter. The old Nonon would've preferred to stay back and blast them from long range, how boring, how limited. *God, she's so cool*, he found himself thinking.

And maybe that wasn't about love, but it was close enough.

~~~~~

What began as a beachhead on Rakata could not be contained, and Tsumgu drove a wedge through the defenses until at last, who knew how long after the first landing, they were back at the very base of the obelisk, with only the transparent red dome of the high velocity life-fiber barrier between them and the controls. The island's defenders had been rallied by enforcer squads of committed zealots multiple times, but there just weren't enough of them to make running away scarier than facing down the army of the reconquest and their unstoppable leader.

The wide central platform at the peak of the battlements was crawling with men and DTRs. Every doorway, every angle of approach was covered by needle-claymores and steely eyed gunners. A triage area had been put in a corner. Every minute, a group of DTRs leapt over the walls for a sortie with the beleaguered defenders who crouched in craters and obscure corridors, and when they did Reiketsu used her Senjutsu mode to sneak mines and flashbangs behind them so when they tried to fall back they got a nasty surprise. Why just kill them when you could utterly demoralize them?

Tsumugu oversaw the technicians working on the barrier-breaker – a sort of large cylindrical object based off the Emergency Rescue Suction Device but with thick metal legs – with satisfaction. For him this was fun in his typical, scowling kind of way. Nothing better than a perfectly executed, methodical operation, it was like a puzzle. His scowl turned to smile though when the barrier collapsed all at once with a noise like rushing wind and was sucked into the barrier breaker.

**“ Good work. Strike team, prepare to breach!”**

~ “*Wait!*” ~ A scratchy voice over his earpiece suddenly cut in ~ “*I think it might be a trap!*”

**“Who is this? State name and rank,”** Tsumugu knew it was Mataro, but he went through the proper protocol anyway.

~ “*Uh, Mataro Mankanshoku sir? Non-er- Jakuzure's personal aide sir,*” ~ Mataro replied with a frustrated sigh.

**“ Yeah, I know. It could always be a trap Mataro, but that's why we command from the battlefield. So we can adapt.”**



~ “No, I mean this time specifically they’re up to something.” ~

Tsumugu’s eyes narrowed, “**Why?**”

~ “Because where’s all their true believer types if they aren’t? Don’t you usually feel like there’s a lot more of those shaved-head guys who’ll just rush you even though they know it’s suicide?” ~

It gave Tsumugu pause, he did *feel* like there might have been fewer of them. But then he couldn’t be everywhere at once and it wasn’t like he’d been counting. And he doubted Mataro had been either. So he said, “**I doubt you’ve been counting.**”

~ “Come ON man! I know what it feels like when someone’s letting you get away with something.” ~

**“ I appreciate the advice Mankanshoku, but your instincts are still in training. Just stay tight and we’ll see if there’s a tra-”**

~ “Hold on!” ~ This time it was Nonon, breathlessly shouting over the rush of battle, ~ “Kid’s usually got good instincts about this. Aikuro, go check in the coms room and see if you can – one sec – HIYA!” ~ Feedback from an especially loud clang of blades momentarily overwhelmed her, ~ “Figure out what he’s talking about.” ~

~ “**On it!**” ~ Aikuro said loudly.

~ “Everything seem normal over there?” ~ She then asked Tsumugu.

**“Yeah, everything’s – actually I’ll get back to you on that,”** Tsumugu cut himself off as he spotted a familiar figure sauntering over the walls, **“Looks like I will have someone serious to fight after all.”**

It was lucky though that Tsumugu had good memory for faces, because otherwise he might not have recognized the same Russian mercenary commander he and Aikuro had never quite managed to kill staring him down, flanked by a dozen of his most elite comrades. Last time Tsumugu had seen him, he was wearing a heavy black armored Ultima Uniform, and compared to that now he was practically naked. Skintight pants and sleeves with glowing hexagonal patterns, shiny metallic capes falling from tasseled, a high brimmed helm with a huge plumed crest and a glass targetting overlay over his eyes, unfurled chest plates revealing scarred, hairy musculature, and wicked multi-barreled energy cannons built into thick gauntlets. There was a grim cast to his eyes, he knew he’d barely managed to survive before and would need all his wits and his soldiers to make it out alive this time. But it had to be done, if he didn’t at least try to save this base, no way he was getting paid.

“Tsumugu Kinagase. We meet again,” He said jeeringly, and then said something in Russian that made his team take up combat-ready stances. Tsumugu could help but notice that all of them had three-star uniforms of various kinds.

He whispered to Yuda, **“Uwais, you handle clearing the obelisk. Take everyone with you. You’ll just be in the way out here.”**

“Sir!” Yuda chirped as he scrambled off.

Tsumugu then regarded the mercenaries, sword at the ready. Reiketsu used her Senjutsu form to produce a slew of rocket launchers and guns from her hidden pockets (she'd been training her storage capacity so now she could fit an entire arsenal in that nowhere space) and Tsumugu seemed to grow a metal peacock tail. **"Tolstoy. I was wondering when you'd show up."**

"Rrr, that's not my name! It's Vasiliy!"

**"Whatever. I see you've upgraded."**

"You like? It's the new *Praetorian* model, REVOCS' best! And you're, uh, on fire?"

**"Thanks,"** Tsumugu said with sly half smile.

And that really seemed to piss Vasiliy off because he said, "Okay what is it with you Honnouji weirdos? I thought you were the ones who didn't like to banter!"

**"I don't. But when it's stalling you..."**

"What?" Vasily was lucky his comrades didn't speak Japanese or else he'd no doubt have seemed quite foolish. And indeed before his eyes Yuda blew the blasting charges on the doors around the base of the obelisk and the entire army rushed into the final bunker screaming with eagerness to shut the whole thing down.

Tsumugu pointed his sword at Vasily, **"This is your last chance to surrender. This fortress will fall and you will not escape this time."**

Vasily laughed, "I think not. You see we've done the calculations and really it doesn't matter whether or not you take this base, or even if you beat REVOCS. The new Japan, this 'new order' won't last in the long run. You've pissed off all the great powers – shaking things up too much - but REVOCS has their ears and their money. So what, I'm gonna work with you guys and blacklist my company with all my major employers just to watch Satsuki Kiryuin's regime collapse in a couple years? REVOCS is part of the order of things, and you can't just beat down that order with Kamui.

**"Right, and who cares that they're evil?"** Tsumugu shot back.

"Oh what is evil," Vasily waved a dismissive hand, "They're religious nuts, that's nothing new. At least them I know are only humans, and not half-alien freaks who think they're gods."

And Tsumugu had to laugh, he couldn't help it, **"PFFFHahahahaHAHAHA! Oh, you really don't have a clue do you?"**

And with enough time bought for Yuda to get everyone inside, Tsumugu's face suddenly went dead serious and he flung himself at Vasiliy, all guns blazing.

Yuda had been told that he should expect the fiercest fight inside the obelisk itself. Hardened zealots, dark and evil seeming corridors, and unmapped maze of a layout. And yeah the corridors were sure evil looking, smooth black metal and red lights everywhere, but even from the moment they got in he could tell something was up. Where were the hardened zealots? He lead the charge, taking every corner and room with methodical fury, gunning down the few terrified technicians in thick robes that he found.

Eventually they beat their way into the very heart of the thing, and someone called to Yuda that they had found the main control room. Down a flight of stairs and overlooking the deep pit at the center, Yuda could smell the stench of the bodies below even through the sealed windows. From the looks of all the screens and control panels everywhere this was definitely where he needed to be.

But everyone's faces went pale in the doorway at the sight out those ghastly windows, and nobody would set foot in there. So Yuda, hand over his mouth, crept in first, saying, "Geez, nobody warned me about *this*. Well come on guys, let's get us some medals!"

Once a few more squads had piled in someone asked, "So what do we do sir?"

Yuda hadn't expected to be in charge at this point, but he knew his orders, "Smash all of it! C'mon, who's got some explosives?"

And that's exactly what they did, taking a bit of glee in bashing in all the buttons and dials with the buttstocks of their guns, then tossing C4 all over the place. A jubilant mood was in the air as they all filed out, slammed their thumbs on the detonators and high fived over the sounds of the explosion. Alarm klaxons immediately started blaring and Yuda got up to survey the damage, still laughing.

His laughter died down a bit when he rounded the corner only to find a sheer wall of fire. "Whoo, now *that* is a fire!" He chuckled, but then immediately sobered up when from deep below there came a noise of tremendous scraping, deep rusty groans, and then a shuddering rumble like the whole building was about to go down. But all that quickly died out, replaced by a consistent vibration of the walls and continuous chugging noise.

"What in the..." Yuda braved the fire with his Ultima Uniform and leaned through the now broken window. Down below in the pit, the sluices and grinders that had collected all the bodies were *moving*. Drawing them into the inner depths of the machine. Conduits running up the sides of the pit glowed red, and Yuda tilted his head up to follow them and saw the giant plug of lead around which the entire obelisk was built blotting out the sky. But slow, ever so slowly, it was rising.

"I'm beginning to think the kid was onto something," He muttered to himself, then called out, "Alright, time to go! Everyone back to the boats!"

And so the army stormed right back out the way they came in, all aware they seemed to have set off a chain reactions they didn't fully understand.

~~~~~

**"On it!"** Aikuro said loudly. He leapt off his position at the bow of the forward most battleship and set off vaulting from ship to ship. Despite how far apart they were, stretched in a staggered formation almost to the horizon, he could make each jump without much trouble. Plus, the long moments spent quietly scrambling through the air gave him time to survey things, think about what Mataro had said.

And it was on one of those flights that he spotted something out in the distance, behind the fleet. There was something about the water there, a... shadow.

~ "Mikisuki sir!" ~ A woman officer who was commanding the central radar called him, ~ "We're picking up something underwater due east of the fleet!" ~

**“ Yeah, I see it. Nonon can you sense that thing?”**

~ “*It’s got life-fibers in it. Lots of them. Can you handle it?*” ~

~ “*Too big to be a submarine... Any idea what it could be sir?*” ~

Aikuro shook his head sadly, **“I guess Mataro was right after all. Have the fleet brace for attack! Retarget all guns on the new object!”**

~ “*Sir there’s something else! Aircraft, enemies, lots of them!*” ~

**“ And that’ll be where all the zealots are,”** Aikuro rerouted away from the command ship towards the rear of the fleet, watching the guns on every ship turn around and focus in on the new threat. By the time he got there he could see the enemy dropships coming in. It wasn’t a strike team, it was a swarm.

**“ Not a single one sets foot on deck!”** He shouted as the bombardment began. Between the flack curtain and Aikuro’s arrows the sky was filled with explosions as far as the eye could see. But it wasn’t enough. Within a few minutes, Aikuro was out of arrows except only ten made of hardened life-fibers – and he wasn’t using those, they were only for situations where he was guaranteed a hit.

And that shadow was getting closer. It bulged underneath the water, just a ripple. A vast, continuous ripple dozens of feet tall bearing right for the fleet with murderous intent. It filled Aikuro, and a good amount of the marines and crew assembled to repel boarders, with primal dread.

But Nekketsu wasn’t subject to any thalassophobia, she just saw a threat, *[Mataro! We have to get him out of here!]*

Aikuro nodded, then ordered, **“Get the command ship and its escort free and prepare for boarders!”**

Behind Aikuro the marine DTRs (equipped with special flotation devices, which made it look like they were wearing orange life-buoy tubes) opened fire as the first wave of dropships dove in. But no matter how many needles they fired they couldn’t stop them all, and Aikuro watched in horror as they disgorged their contents. Elite troops in all manner of ultima uniforms collapsed right on top of them fleet, and bloody brawls swept their decks clear. Aikuro wiped out the first wave to land on his ship quickly, and then leapt over to the next, but by the time he was clearing it he could only watch as a *Medjay* model three-star dropped down onto it and in the moment it activated its ability to control machinery turned the back half of the ship to splinters. And when it turned and took flight, heading right towards him, he couldn’t resist plugging him with one of his hardened life-fiber arrows. Nine left.

And then the ship on the other side of Aikuro *disappeared*.

As in a fountain of white foam wrapped around it and with a wrenching motion the entire thing plunged into the water. Too late Aikuro realized exactly what that shadow was. He’d seen it before.

**“Oh come on,”** He breathed as something that dwarfed the ship it had just pulled under rolled across the surface of the water, sea boiling around it. Mottled black flesh, barnacle encrusted and lined with deep rivets, metal plugs to which chains had once been attached and around which the skin glistened with rot and pus. Aikuro sprinted alongside it, watching as back past the tip of the

battleship he was currently on the sea writhed and part of it emerged further on. And though he'd been expecting its tail no, that was merely more of the beast's expansive back! The tail, great fluke a hundred yards across at least, pounded out of the brine still further in the distance, blotting out the sun with its rotten magnificence.

**“Y’know, I never really thought I was afraid of the ocean until now.”**

~ “*W-what is that thing?*” ~ The officer of the radar center breathed, terrified. ~ “*It’s a monster!*” ~

And Nekketsu, still not at all phased, took over, [*Yeah, that’s neat and all, but let’s get moving!*] To her mind that was a life-fiber being and so she sized it up not on a physical level and concluded that, oh yeah, she could totally take that thing. The possibility of Aikuro getting dragged down and drowning didn’t really register to her, [*I can’t take that thing on my own you know.*]

Aikuro smiled, **“What, you think just ‘cause its scary I’m not gonna take that thing down? C’mon Nekketsu, let’s go fishing!”**

And as he vaulted from ship to ship through the chaos that fell upon the fleet, dispatching stray cultists where he could, a desperate chase occurred between the hybrid whale and the ship it had chosen for its next target. No sane battleship helmsman would ever swerve so tightly between other ships but the monster surging behind him, a towering mound shoving ships aside with its sheer mass, left him no option. But whoever was piloting the ship knew where Aikuro was, and at the last second made a turn, the tightest turn a huge hunk of floating steel could ever make, and lured the beast right into his path.

And there was the one, single weak spot Aikuro could think of. Right next to its slobbering maw with the cords of baleen that whipped like tentacles and corded together into big, braided tusks. An eye. Black and beady and tiny compared to the unimaginable size of the thing, it was a hell of a target. But Aikuro flung himself towards it in a perfect swan dive and at the last second plunged the bladed tip of his bow right into it. In a fountain of dark, oily blood he wrenched as hard as he could with all Nekketsu and Ryuko’s strength and with a noise like a thousand foghorns the whale tilted ever so slowly, rolling first so it’s great flipper waved lazily in the air and then even further, onto its belly. And for one gut wrenching moment Aikuro thought he might not be able to get bow free and would be pulled into the shiny blue depths, but Nekketsu fired her thrusters and they soared away to land on another ship.

~ “*Everything okay over there?*” ~ Nonon asked.

**“ Yeah yeah, don’t worry about us!”** Aikuro said with gleeful determination as the furious monster turned to him with its remaining eye bloodshot. **“ You were right, rearguard sure isn’t boring!”**

~~~~~

~ “***You were right, rearguard sure isn’t boring!***” ~ Nonon heard Aikuro say as she set foot on the ground again. Back on the blasted black rock of Krakatoa, where they had begun. One of Takamori’s mech’s giant feet smashed down onto the island with a short quaking. Uzu was scrambling around on it, and she was back to dealing with Rosuketsu one-on-one. But all good things had to come to an end.

And in that moment, fighting as one, Nonon and Saiban needed no consultation to decide how they would end things. They would never defeat Rosuketsu directly, but there was always one way. In a

smooth, death defying lunge they plunged right for Rosuketsu, right into it's singing blades. Only in the last moment did Nonon neatly turn her body, but rather than dodge she found her left shoulder impaled to the hilt on Rosuketsu's shortsword, where it slipped behind her scapula, a raised wedge underneath her skin.

Later, she would be amazed every time she told it that she managed to pull it off. That she and Saiban had known what to do without question. They'd both been sure the other would flinch, would say it was too risky, but nothing of the sort happened. And Ryuko would tell her that proved without question that they had mastered fighting as one.

But in the moment, Nonon gasped and gritted her teeth against the pain. Uzu whipped his head around, shouting "**Nonon!**" in panic, but before he could even respond it was over. *Kiba* sung swift and lethal in a low arc, slicing clean through rock and up, up and Nonon's right arm flung high in the air to punctuate it. But not as high as Minazuki's. It sailed far, far higher. So high that by the time it dropped with a "plop" in the foaming sea it was trailing smoke from the soot rising above.

"GYAH!" The scream that came from Minazuki's mouth was surprisingly human sounding. And the Kamui reeled back, blood dribbling from its new stump. Nonon suppressed the instinct to stop and peel the blade out, and rushed back in. End it, now or never!

But it was not to be. As Nonon leapt, a blast of concussive force raced from Rosuketsu, sending her tumbling back. Her body hit the ground, sword still embedded, but rather than feel weak from the injury Nonon was back on her feet. The end was so close now they could taste it! Sweat beaded on her pale forehead as they watching Minazuki rise as well.

It examined the wound, and before Nonon's very eyes its sleeve changed, grew over the bloody end, cauterized it with a jolt that vibrated Minazuki's body and set her chest heaving, and then it was done. In place of an arm long tendrils of life-fiber, run through with the most delicate of lacy patterns, grew from her shoulder now.

And Nonon groaned as she pulled the sword from her. Thinking quickly, Saiban followed Rosuketsu and wrapped a part of himself tight over the wound, drinking in the dribbling blood and staunching her bleeding. A good thing too, or else she might really have bled to death.

*[Well that was a bust,]* Saiban summarized their sentiment. *[Note for next time – let's go for the head!]*

*Oh, don't look at it, don't look at it,* Nonon thought as she looked right at the glistening red blade she held in fingers she willed to stop trembling. *Well. There it is. That's my blood. I've never seen so much of it all at once.*

Maybe this all would have demoralized them but for the look in Rosuketsu eyes. What exactly that look meant Nonon didn't know, but combined with the probing pulse of its aura, fast and frantic, she could get a pretty good guess.

It was *scared*. It was incable of understanding. This... thing had damaged it! Marred its purity! Upset the slumber of its host! And it had no regard at all for its own life! What *was* it?

"I'm fine Uzu!" She called, hefting *Kiba* in both hands. The shooting pain was nothing. After experiencing the hellish sensory deprivation of Ryuko's empowerment, it was just proof that she really was alive. She clenched her teeth into a defiant grin. Rosuketsu took an uncertain step back.

Nonon charged in, brazen in her confidence. And when Rosuketsu lashed with tentacles and sword her focus was strong as ever and she twisted through them, rolling through the air and chopping that pretty little lace off. Saiban drank it in and though it was a drop in the bucket compared to both his and Rosuketsu's reserves consuming each little life-fiber was immensely satisfying, restoring his flagging energy like cool clear water.

And while they fought on across the barren rock Nonon heard with clarity the reports from across the battlefield. Setbacks and counterattack, but her Kamui were handling them without much difficulty

~ "Sir!" ~ She heard Yuda bark to Tsumugu, ~ *"Everyone's back on the boats and shoving off!"* ~

~ **"Why aren't you with them!"** ~ The clash of blades rang through Tsumugu's earpiece, ~ **"Hold that one off, quick now!"** ~

~ *"Wha-AaH! I got 'em don't worry! I came back for you sir, we've got to get off this island!"* ~

~ **"A little busy now!"** ~

*"But Tsumugu, the obelisk is starting to move!"* ~

A pause from Tsumugu. Then, ~ **"You said you destroyed it."** ~

~ *"We did, I swear! That's what made it start!"* ~

Nonon looked up from her fight, suddenly startled. And there was no denying it. The lead core of the Rakata obelisk was high, high above the clouds, at the very peak of the megastructure. Crackling electricity and red light surrounded it.

No, it wasn't just the Rakata one.

*All three were rising.*

~ *"Oh God, that's the trap!"* ~ Mataro realized just a second before everyone else.

~ **"What?"** ~

~ **"No-Fuck! How could we be so stupid!"** ~

Nonon growled, "Tsumugu, shut it down. I don't care about the collateral damage, do it now!"

~ **"Going!"** ~ Nonon saw the tiny red trail of Tsumugu and Reiketsu blasting in a straight line right towards the obelisk. But then to her dismay a n equally tiny black dot sprung from the earth, seized him by the foot, and hurled him down to earth in a cloud of dust. ~ **"Vasiliy! YOU BASTAARD!"** ~ He yelled as he fell.

And that was it. In the thick of the battle they'd noticed much too late, the Kamui's aura sensing too focused on their current opponents to sense the blood pouring into great engines below their feet. The thrumming that had been building, the klaxons, those weren't just part of the chaos of battle now. They were swelling so loud it was intolerable.

~ **"NOW YOU SHALL SEE!"** ~ Takamori's voice boomed as passionately as it was possible for a simulated tongue, ~ **"DESPAIR, CHILDREN OF MATOI, FOR THE DOOM YOU HAVE**

## *BROUGHT TO EARTH” ~*

Blinding light. The purest, most devastating thundercrack of sound. All the smoke and clouds were banished for miles around to perfect blue sky. The sea sheared to calmness in a wall of concussive spray. And before anyone knew what had happened it was over.

The plugs, accelerated to speeds that should only have been possible for a comet tumbling through space, slammed into the ground. The spires with their intricately woven webs of life-fibers instantly exploded. And the ground shook with a force that brought Takamori’s mech to its knees.

For anyone who hasn’t been in an earthquake, what occurs is hard to accurately describe. First your legs go to jelly as the most fundamental fact of life - the existence of solid ground – is abruptly nullified. And then something like an electric jolt, painful, shoots through them and up into your body, immobilizing you. And if you’re lucky that’s it, or at least the subsequent waves aren’t as strong. Nobody near Krakatoa was lucky that day. The sandy parts of the islands instantly gave up the ghost on holding all this masonry and the concrete fortifications sunk into them like liquid. In other places solid rock crumbled to dust. Krakatoa itself wasted no time in splitting itself into several parts, separated by deep canyons. No point trying to guess how many were swallowed by the ground or crushed, but at least those at sea were spared this fate.

But what no normal earthquake comes with is *the sound*. It had been quite a day for loud sounds. The artillery was loud, the doleful cry of the hybrid whale was loud, battling mechs were loud, the obelisks activating and exploding was loud. *The sound* wasn’t loud. Loud wasn’t a big enough word to describe it.

How could you describe it? It was low, like a bass drum. Both clear and rumbling, full of micro-tones that sound like scratching and scraping in slow motion. It was the noise of something buried deep in the Earth, an unfathomable power rousing slowly and with great pains.

It didn’t just fill the ears but the entire mind. There would not be a single person who survived that day who didn’t wake up in cold sweats from dreams of that sound. Except for the one person nearest its source. The very moment all this began the most powerful noise canceling effect raced through Saiban’s headphones. Uzu, sensing what all this trouble meant, had already beat a hasty retreat and had Seijitsu’s cape stuffed in his ears. But so close to the source and without any protection Nonon could see the trails of blood pouring from Minazuki’s ears, while the kamui operating her body nonchalantly observed events.

For a time that felt like years all was filled with the vibration of the earthquake and drowned out by *the sound*. Nonon allowed Saiban to gently carry her off the ground and hover – better than being on the ground. Everything except her shoulder felt numb from the shaking, but the longer they hovered there it passed. Seeing the ground vibrate made her vision feel fuzzy and weak.

And then silence. With the fading of *the sound* there was a frozen moment wherein absolute stillness reigned. All fighting stopped, all movement paused. Everyone, even the hybrid beasts, waited to see what would happen next.

Then the volcano erupted.



# Ring of Fire: Krakatoa: 6

## Chapter Summary

This continues to spin out of control. But y'know I've gotten a decently positive response for this sequence so far even if it has been the hardest thing to write in the entire series so far so I'll do what it takes to make it as good as I know how. One more. ONE MORE. And then we'll be done with this arc for good. This was supposed to be the last one and I have a very detailed framework of the last part (the final confrontation between Nonon and Rosuketsu, all the important dialogue is done I just have to connect it). So it should be up in the next couple days barring no quarantine-based bouts of distraction.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2067

~~~~~

The events that occurred immediately after the eruption of Krakatoa – or rather during it – were absolute chaos for everyone aboard the fleet. Comms were a complete mess of shouting back and forth between the various captains and high commanders and the only intelligible, non-panicked thing anyone heard was a short declaration from Nonon. And sure it might have been a bit reassuring that she was still alive and didn't seem too disturbed, but then she had a *kamui*, practically a demigod in the eyes of most of them. Yeah, she was gonna get through this just fine. But what about them?

Well, even as the bleak gray ash clouds were blotting out the sun the waves of the REVOCS counter attack had already done so. So many dropships, so many Ultima Uniforms. The decks were crawling with bulletproof, hardened cultists who glowed with disorienting strobing lights, and this time despite their best efforts it was nowhere near a fair fight. So while plenty of the tough as nails marines were following Nonon's orders to kill them all before they could slip away, most of crew could only flee in panic or barricade the doors below deck and hope they didn't break through. Several ships were already sinking because the cultists had made it to their engine rooms, and the water – roiling and coated in filmy ash – was not inviting.

To say nothing of the fact that Aikuro and some kind of sea monster of a size that was hard for the mind to grasp were currently turning an area of it in the center of the fleet into a fuming vortex, the jagged tips of the abandoned ships he was using as platforms jerking and flaming and crumpling as cords of baleen lashed at the tiny purple blur like tentacles. That was instant death over there, and it had already claimed a fair few victims.

But in spite of all this despair, true despair, wasn't common. The men and women who were now so close to seeing their country free knew the kamui they had fought under. They'd be back and they wouldn't leave a single one of these REVOCS scum alive. It was just a matter of being one of the ones who survived until then.

But that was merely a backdrop for a sequence of phenomena that every sailor witnessed but which wouldn't make much sense to them until long after. First, the army could be seen speeding back to the fleet in disarray, barely ahead of a blast front of burning ash and toxic gas that rolled out across the horizon from sea to sky, swerving between a bombardment of molten ejecta. They needed to be hauled aboard and given gas masks or they wouldn't survive. But in the chaos there was nobody to give the command for any of the ships to move in close, so they could only watch in dismay.

That was when the nav-computers began operating on their own. Of their own accord, every ship began to move, operating in perfect sync to execute a battle plan which no human coordination could ever pull off. A flotilla sailed in towards the volcano to the rescue of the army, a defensive ring around them provided a flak curtain keeping the worst of REVOCS off of them. Another one surrounded Aikuro and the sea monster and the gunners, under insistent orders from a woman's voice they didn't recognize, got the courage together to open fire on the distracted leviathan, sending plumes of wine-colored blood up into the air to mingle with the ash. When the crew on the various bridges tried to get access to their computers all they got instead was the cartoon face of a woman with blonde hair and a tiny snub nose who happily informed them that she had taken control of the fleet and they should go make themselves useful somewhere else.

And as bizarre as that was, the reports coming through that someone on Nonon's flagship was pulling the army boats up to deck using a harpoon gun were even more so. Why, that would mean they were hauling them by hand! And it was working! And apparently, if the garbled messages over the comms were right, he was just a boy! Perplexion met with a faint hope as the sailors watched metal cables haul the drifting boats right up the side of the aircraft carrier – maybe the army would be saved after all!

Next, and even more inspiring although in a different way, Aikuro paused for the briefest of moments and unleashed... something, it could only be described as an energy beam. Vanishingly thin, pure white, it emitted no light or fire and looked like nothing more than a distortion, except for the sonic booms that instantly appeared around it in rings and created a roar of rough, intensely physical noise. It carved a perfect little hole in the oncoming wall of ash, but was gone so quickly that most of the sailors barely even believed they'd seen it. If they saw it at all.

But plenty more noticed the second one, a few minutes later, because it was followed by a dull whine from within the erupting Krakatoa. It was high and pure but dropped steadily into a deep, electronic sounding pounding, and then a return shot came back. Dwarfing Aikuro's pure and precise thin white line, it glowed burning red and left afterimages on their eyes as it blasted across the sky. The sea parted around it and it struck with lethal accuracy – but Aikuro had already gotten out of the way and so the beam simply obliterated an already sinking ship as it stretched out to the horizon.

And now the third volley came right back from Aikuro, still airborne, and another thin white line traced its way back to volcano. But this time there was no retaliation. Just a voice – a man's, but none of them recognized it – booming out from the volcano as though from a loudspeaker. But no human technology could have made a voice this crystal clear. It was soft and gentle, on the high pitched side, at once refined and earnest.

**“It doesn't matter what I was. In my heart, my soul, in every way that matters, I am human. You don't understand me at all,”** And then a moment later **“SEN-I-SOSHITSU!”**

With that shout as loud and clear as a bell, a golden light of blinding intensity swept up from the base of the volcano. What had been invisible under the onrushing ash was now revealed as it

banished all the volcano's ejecta across an entire hemisphere. Sunlight suddenly shone through as the stormy gray clouds dissipated, and they could see all the way to the shores of Krakatoa where amidst the primal menace of the slowly crawling lava and lahars the light expanded magnificently, like a flower.

A great cheer erupted across the fleet. Their Pink Devil had done it, there was nothing she couldn't do! And more importantly they were saved, there would be no wall of boiling debris annihilating them, no choking poisonous gas, and no rampaging kamui coming in at the last minute and making all their efforts to survive pointless. They fought back harder than ever, and REVOCS faltered and collapsed in the face of this resurgence. For them the day was well and truly lost – could they who had been so indoctrinated to hate the sinful human race ever understand the righteous fury that was now revenged indiscriminately upon them? No, they only saw mindless savages hooting like the apes they were and wondered how the gods had forsaken them so.

This seemed like a fitting end to the day's miraculous events, but there was one last phenomena the fleet would witness. A shadow passed over them as, in defiance of logic, the entire several-hundred-foot-long body of the hybrid whale flew over their heads, tumbling end over end towards the belching mouth of Krakatoa.

What follows is the account they would later piece together from the few whose actions they had merely witnessed, although it would be the version most of them told as though they'd seen the whole thing with their own eyes, for that was how legends grew:

~~~~~

Nonon, closest to the peak of Krakatoa, was gifted with an unforgettable view of its eruption. The tip of the mount exploded into a million burning pieces as from deeper below a splash of molten lava breached through them, and black cloud billowed with it. The brooding little smokestack that had marked it swiftly became a ballooning cone that filled the sky and would continue to do so – it would later turn out – for months. It was so ingrained in Nonon that Saiban would protect her that her instincts didn't even compel her to run away, so she just let her mouth hang open as the chunks of rock and soon fully fledged lava flows rolled down the island below her.

That was until a foul sulfurous smell hit her and she quickly clamped it shut.

“Saiban! That's toxic gas! Help me!”, she hissed. She didn't know much about volcanoes but she did know that. The noise cancellation in her headphones meant she still couldn't hear herself speak, but Saiban heard.

*[On it!]* He was quick to refocus despite his own sense of wonder and fear, molding himself into a gas mask across her face – a nearly transparent yellow-green plate that completely wrapped up the front side of her head, with vents along her jawline and a reinforced strip of shiny gold from headphones up to the antenna that crept from her hair. Once the fresh, cool air started pumping in she could breathe again. *[How's that? Are we safe now?]* Nonon was out of the immediate danger and so he went on, *[Wow... I never thought I'd get to see this myself! So much raw power!]*

He felt the instinctive, primal awe and terror of the Earth's wrath that Nonon's ancestors had carried with them for untold millions of years. It was enhanced too by his awareness that where life-fibers had to bring about physical change in the world through an intermediary, their “power” or aura, there was nothing driving this. It was, from the perspective of a life-fiber, doing this on its own, and there was something frightening yet fascinating about scraping against that which seemed

impossible. How could the world move without anyone behind it? How was it so much more powerful than him? No matter how much of Nonon's blood he drank he could never defeat this.

~ *"Nonon! Nonon are you still there! Please give us a sign!"* ~ It was Houka, and his voice was the only noise Nonon could hear.

"Good news Houka, I found out what the obelisks do! They erupt volcanoes! They erupt  *fucking volcanoes !*" Nonon barked, still disconcerted by not being able to hear her own voice it came out hoarse and weird.

~ *"Yes, we can see that. It's... it doesn't make sense. It's just senseless destruction, and to what... ohhh,"* ~ He broke off with something between a chuckle and a groan, ~ *"Shiro! I figured it out! They're trying to ignite the ring of fire!"* ~

Shiro cut in, laughing morosely, ~ *"Whelp. That solves that mystery. I would have expected some kind of ritual, but instead it's so simple. Ugh, if only we'd thought of this before!"*

"What? What is the ring of fire? Is this really important right -," The cone in the sky was spreading, bulging, collapsing down onto her. She barely noticed the wall of ash as it enveloped her, the boiling temperature of no concern to her.

~ *"The ring of volcanoes that runs clear around the shores of the pacific! If they all erupted at once-"* ~ Houka explained in a rushed voice.

~ *"It'd be the death of us all."* ~ Shiro finished.

~ *"Yes, quite. But the real question is why? Why this?"* ~

"Yo! Guys! Can you focus?"

~ *"If they can't have Earth, nobody can,"* ~ Shiro offered darkly.

"Shut the fuck up for a second!" Nonon shouted. The initial wall past, she could barely see ten feet in front of her through the molten haze, "What is going on? Tell me my army isn't all dead, alright?"

~ *"Huh? Oh they're making it out, but not nearly fast enough."* ~

~ *"If some of the ships got in close they could pick them up. But the fleet's in complete disarray."* ~

"Then can you like get them back in order or something?"

~ *"Oh, and it looks like Seijitsu and Reikitsu have figured out how to make gas masks too, interesting."* ~

"Guy! Can you please! You might not be here but I'm still your commander and time is kind of short here!"

~ *"Sorry! Sorry sorry!"* ~ Houka responded, seemingly snapped out of their distracted reverie. ~ *"What do you need?"* ~

"Just... do something about the fleet!"

~ “No need!” ~ Shiro announced triumphantly, ~ “*Izanami and Misaki are in progress on hijacking the ir computers. Now the crews can focus on fighting off the boarders and rescuing the army. We could have just done this from the start, you know.*” ~

“Oh.” That kind of took the wind out of her, “Well thanks, I guess. Actually no, thanks to your kamui, not you two time-wasters!”

~ “*Oh please, we’re already typing up a comprehensive report for Satsuki and the governing council.*” ~

“Whatever. Alright, then let me talk to them. Override all comm lines.”

~ “*You’re on*” ~ Houka said helpfully.

Nonon kept it brief: “They’ve played their one trick. But we’re still here. They’re going to use the chaos to try to escape. Don’t. Let. Them. Kill every last one.”

~ “*Well put. So what are you gonna do now?*” ~ Houka asked.

“Only one thing I can do,” Nonon answered. “That thing is still alive down there. And I’m not leaving this job half done.”

And she plunged down, needing neither ears no eyes, towards the blazing beacon of Rosuketsu’s aura.

~~~~~

Tsumugu was on his feet again the moment he hit the ground, but by the time Vasiliy and the other mercenaries (those who were still alive, which was just about half of the dozen who had accompanied Vasiliy) had surrounded him to continue the fight. It was quickly concluded among them in Russian that they should run, *now*. But there was Tsumugu, standing before him with a glassy gas mask sliding over his face. The volcano was already erupting. They immediately wavered, terror gripping them. They’d didn’t need that to know that he was going to be just fine in the face of the eruption, and also that he was going to cut any one of them that dared flee.

His presence alone was a stormcloud far more menacing than any amount of ash.

“God, what have I *done*? ” Vasiliy murmured, eyes wide.

**“ Now do you get it?” Tsumugu bellowed, “You’ve been sent here to die! You mean nothing to them!”**

“I-I didn’t know... ah, I want to surrender? Accept our surrender, please! We have to get out of here, just help us survive and we’ll accept whatever punishment.”

And then Tsumugu laughed. *Laughed* . Because at this point there wasn’t much else he could do. Old feelings of cold rage returned to him, the simple logic that life-fibers had to be destroyed, and their puppets were even worse. His blood boiled in Reiketsu and she burned against his skin. **“ AHAHAHA! No, motherfucker. Thousands are going to die because of you, and you don’t even know why. If I took you back home you’d live in prison, but you can just not make it home.”**

Vasiliy's face turned from terror stricken to hardened, an ugly snarl. If that was how it had to be, if he was fighting for his life, "Then neither will you."

And so their battle raged on against the backdrop of the fuming volcano. Tsumugu was efficient, more than capable of focusing down a single target while the others desperately tried to split his attention. Bursts of fire, cables and telekinetically hurled debris from the *Medjay* models, it all barely distracted him, and only Vasiliy had any hope of standing up to Tsumugu one-on-one for long, the gulf of speed and dexterity was just too great. But they fought for their lives with synchronicity usually alien to the glory chasing mercenaries, and those few ordinary mercenary soldiers (who had no hope of surviving) who weren't desperately cramming onto escape boats tried to make themselves useful with distracting gunfire, grenades, even throwing their bodies in his way. But Tsumugu had practically pioneered the tactics for going up against life-fibers which they were making up on the fly, and it all amounted to nothing.

He had managed to slay the first of them when he heard a shout, "Tsumugu! Sir!"

**"Yuda! What are you *doing* here!"** Tsumugu rounded on him as Yuda beat his way through, tackling one of the elites on his way.

"I came back -" Yuda stopped to wheeze, "For you sir!"

**"What? You'll be killed!"**

*[Let's just get him out of here, quickly!]* Reiketsu suggested, and just as Vasiliy realized this foolish comrade of Tsumugu's could be useful Tsumugu rolled and skidded past him, grabbed Yuda effortlessly and bounding up to the top of the battlements. He spotted the fleeing transports of the army and took careful aim at one of the nearest.

"Wait, what are you do-AAAAAAAAAAGH!" He swiftly spun Yuda around by the legs and threw him as hard as he could. The man shot off headfirst through the air like a bullet. The shot was good, Yuda would land right on the hull of the armored boat and – courtesy of that ever useful stolen ultima uniform – survive unharmed by his flight.

But that was all the time Vasiliy needed to get close and finally land a punch to Tsumugu's back. Almost in the same moment Reiketsu's ribbons lashed at him but he skidded away and Tsumugu was sent tumbling down to the next layer of battlements.

Where he landed on his feet and leapt back up, but that was all the time it took for those of the mercenaries who could fly to grab the others and spring into the air, leaving just Vasiliy. Who didn't let Tsumugu pursue them, rushing him down and firing jets of blue napalm-flame from the cannons in his gauntlets. It was enough to ensure their escape, and they joined the swarm of jets and drones and VTOLs fleeing the oncoming wall death.

**" So,"** Tsumugu grunted, **"Now you're really going to die."**

"They're gonna take their uniforms with them you know," Vasiliy laughed, shocked at his own act of selflessness, "They'll sell them to the military, and soon everyone in the world will know the secrets of life-fibers. I bet they'll even make Kamuis with them, and then you won't be top dog anymore! One way or another your new order will come crashing down! This isn't over!"

But Tsumugu wasn't interested in hearing more, and he said **"There are two things you need to know: One, our order isn't about Japan or any other country. It's about protecting the world**

**from destruction by life-fibers. And two, if they bond with their own Kamui they'll see that they're aren't against our order but on its side."**

Vasiliy blinked, "What are you *talking* about? You use life-fibers just the same as we do!"

Now it was Tsumugu's turn to stop and look perplexed, **"You... really don't know, do you? That Kamui aren't just parasites, that they have minds of their own?"** From the look on his face Tsumugu could tell the Russian mercenary had not, and for a moment his rage cooled, **"That really does make me wonder what kind of propaganda they tell about us in other countries, I'll have to look into that. As for you, I'd explain, but you won't be alive long enough for it to matter."**

He blasted forward towards Vasiliy relentlessly, a flurry of blows forcing him back until he was teetering on the edge of the giant flaming pit where once the obelisk had stood. He scrambled to stand, knowing that there was no chance he could get past a foe so much stronger and faster than him on his own. Tsumugu knew it too, and he paused to give him a chance to decide whether he would plunge to his death or die by the sword.

So it was pretty surprising to him when Vasiliy vanished. He leapt up into the air with just the right timing to plunge a fist into the hull of a low-flying REVOCS fighter jet.

*[Shit!]* Reiketsu exclaimed in sudden burst of panic, whipping out a rocket launcher on one of her ribbons and trying to shoot it down. However, though the rocket hit an engine, somehow the damage seemed to seal itself up with just a lurch. *[It's one of those life-fiber infused ones that regenerates, huh. Sorry, he got the jump on me.]*

Tsumugu sighed, **"He got the jump on both of us. Let him go."** The sound of battle had ended, so silence reigned save for the low rumble of the onrushing ash. Everything around him was dead now, the toxic gas had finished off the last of the poor souls who'd been stuck on the island. Nothing but broken masonry and bodies. In the stillness, his rage cooled.

This was supposed to be behind him, wasn't it? Kinue was avenged, the world was saved, all his preconceptions against Kamui and against Ryuko long settled. It wasn't like he got flashbacks of her death, but the feeling was the same. He couldn't save them.

And that wasn't rational, wasn't healthy. Realistically by the time they made it here the obelisks were already ready. And they really had come as fast as they could, nobody – not even Ryuko – could have done better in their place. But it wasn't good enough.

*[Well. Some party, huh?]* Reiketsu surveyed the damage. Tsumugu smiled, he didn't want his dark thoughts to ruin the experience of battle which all kamui so loved, nor her still new and wondrous experience of Earth. Fortunately, she refused to let him. *[How'd we get here, huh? It feels so strange, that this place is so far from home. And now the whole way back is going to be completely different, just because of this one volcano.]*

Tsumugu nodded, absently kicking a fallen artillery gun, sending it skidding with just a light tap, **"This is the farthest from Japan I think I've ever been too."**

*[Seems like the others are still going at it. I think I can sense Saiban right at the center.]*

**"Not surprising, you really expect a little thing like some lava to stop Nonon?"**

Reiketsu giggled, *[ Well , she's a bit of a glory hog we all know that, and too stubborn for her own good . But i t's true, it looks like Saiban really isn't drawing any power from Ryuko anymore, is he? What the hell happened?]*

**“I don't know. It's got to have something to do with what's going on with Satsuki and Ryuko, but did Nonon reject her? I can't believe Ryuko would cut her off to sabotage her, doesn't matter that they fell out she wouldn't try to kill her. But otherwise she'd have to know that they'd be okay without empowerment, and I don't think either of them would have agreed to make that deal beforehand. So Nonon must have rejected her in the moment. Makes sense?”**

*[Makes sense.]*

**“ Can you sense anything from Ryuko?”**

*[... Just a feeling like she knows something's wrong. But that's just the volcano.]*

**“Well, she's right there.... Speaking of, how're we gonna get off this rock?”**

*[I guess we'll have enough energy to swim.]*

**“Guess so...”** Tsumugu trailed off, watching the fleeing aircraft, **“Well hold on, those fighters have life-fibers in them. Do you think-”**

*[I could take them over? Only one way to find out!]*

~~~~~

**“Sarge, they're coming! Do we run?”**

**“Ach, comms are a mess!”** The sergeant who'd taken charge of pulling the army on board Nonon's flagship grunted as she turned off her comms earpiece angrily, **“Keep throwing down those ladders, move!”**

**“But sarge, the water's too rough, they keep wigglin' all over the place! Every time someone tries to grab on they just get swept overboard.”**

The sergeant came over to look, peering over the guardrail where the burly crewmen were throwing thick rope ladders. Below, a crowd of the armored landing boats were floating and bumping around against each other. They had their tops open and crowds of soldiers were standing on them, waving their arms to try to snag a passing ladder. But just as the crewmen said, whenever they managed to get ahold of one of the swinging, whipping ladders they would just be carried with it as the sea rolled, sending them plunging into the foam that was quickly becoming dark and stormy and choked with cloying rafts of volcanic debris. **“Keep trying!”** She ordered, **“We have to get them aboard!”**

And while she joined them in their efforts a younger crewman, a teenager, really, came running up with a box of gas masks, **“Here, take these – GYAH!”** He fell just then, a bullet eviscerating his knee, the rest of the burst thudding into his kevlar and sticking. Behind him, cultists, armed with the flight-capable model of one-star Ultima Uniform. Black and lilac with skintight sleeves and stabilization fins on the legs, they were held aloft courtesy of a pair of whirring red rotors that rose from the backs of their shoulders giving the appearance of two angry red eyes.



“Oh in Matoi’s name – Stand and fight brothers!” The sergeant yelled as she whirled around, needle gun already in hand, and then just as quickly, “What the -”

For there was another teenager, even scrawnier and more weather-beaten, running headlong towards them through the field of fire. Even though he was lugging a huge boarding-harpoon gun almost as tall and thick as he was he moved like the wind, even though a black blindfold obscured his view he didn’t put a foot out of place. They all thought they were sure to witness his imminent death but instead, miraculously he zipped and dodged just right so that at every moment none of the cultists could get a clean shot on him, and without missing beat he was up on the guardrail, still scampering, and then behind them.

Fortunately there came along, as though they had been chasing the teenager, a group of marines who as soon as they were close enough to see what was going on through the chaos all around them started shooting at the cultists from their flank. Between them and the crewmen they were swiftly routed. Most of their Ultima Uniforms popped swiftly but one made it up into the air before his shut down and he fell to the deck, hit his head, and didn’t move after that.

So not in immediate danger, they rounded on the boy as he fiddled with the harpoon gun and began shouting at him.

“Get out of the way! Can’t you see we’re busy? Put that ladder down!”

“Whoa, look how fast his hands are moving!”

“Hey watch where you point that thing! That thing can shoot clean through the deck if you aren’t careful!”

“Silence!” The sergeant roared, “Don’t you know who that is? Look at the blindfold, that’s Mankanshoku!” And there was indeed stunned silence for a second.

And then all the gawking crewmen started asking questions, “The commander’s aide?”

“Our Lady’s adopted brother?”

“He’s just a kid?”

“He was at Honnouji,” She concluded with not entirely undue gravitas. Awed, they watched Mataro as he, twitchy and seemingly oblivious to them all, swiftly tied a tight knot from the end of the harpoon cable to the end of one of the rope ladders and then, bracing a foot on the guardrail, took a short, sharp breath as he aimed. Trying not to think about how he only had one shot at this, he picked a boat and – no, maybe tilt it a little bit higher.

With a pneumatic *foosh* the harpoon gun fired and, ladder streaming along with it, the steel spike embedded itself in the hull of one of the little rescue boats. The men on it were stunned – no doubt that came close enough to hit them. But it didn’t and as they looked they were amazed to see a perfectly stable ladder leading right up aboard the ship. As they began to climb it, Mataro quickly latched the gun and ladder to the guardrail. The crew’s amazement swiftly translated into cheers, “Man-kan-shoku! Man-kan-shoku!”

Mataro, through the hyperfocus of life-fiber stimulants, finally noticed them for the first time. Standing on the guardrail and looking completely surprised he hurried out the words,

“What’re you looking at me for? Go get more of these!” And, still cheering, they ran off after him to the armory to do just that.

The marines who’d been following him finally had a chance to catch their breath, and groaned when Mataro sprinted off again. One of them said, “How is he so fast! It makes no sense!”

“So that really is Mataro Mankanshoku, isn’t it?” The sergeant asked.

He nodded, “Computer told us to keep him safe.”

“Uh, the computer?”

“Yeah, haven’t you heard? The Japanese have some kind of top-secret AI and it’s taken over the whole fleet! ‘Cuz all the captains are too busy panicking and stuff.”

“What?” That didn’t even sound like it could be real, but before she could carry on with that conversation Mataro skidded up short on his way back, detecting before anyone else that something was coming. “Oh no...” She groaned as she saw it too.

A huge mechanical Ultima Uniform with wide mechanical wings crashed down onto the deck, flanked by other flying cultists. A *Medjay* model. Time to run.

But before a full blown panic could break out something else fell from the sky, smashing down between the *Medjay* and the terrified crowds and quickly unfurling. It was Tsumugu, shield held outstretched. Before their very eyes something happened to that shield, like a web of black-red life-fiber ribbons growing out from it, filling in each empty space with metal plating. Its edges pushed forward, glowing molten orange, and then cooled and in no time at all the shield had expanded many yards across in every direction. Bullets pinged harmlessly off the other side as Tsumugu yelled, “**REIKETSU SENJUTSU – ONE MAN PHALANX!**”

Just as swiftly, more of those ribbons sprang from vents along his shoulders and back – in defiance of logic, they brought forth from within those little voids a panoply of firearms. Miniguns, missile launchers, autocannons, most of which were bigger than Tsumugu himself, all spread out behind him until he looked like a peacock with a tail of metal and bullets. Then the shield shrunk down to its normal size and there was just the briefest moment to appreciate the look of surprise on the cultist’s faces before he opened fire.

Ultima Uniforms, like the Goku Uniforms that preceded them, are generally considered to be immune to regular guns, but the truth is this only works up to a point. Given a high volume of fire – and it must be astronomically high – their shielding will eventually deteriorate until it collapses. But an astronomically high volume of fire was exactly what Tsumugu had. A solid cone of orange. It bathed them and the weaker cultists were consumed, the *Medjay* immobilized in the maelstrom until Tsumugu simply walked up to it and with a simple slash his sword cut it down.

Without a moment’s pause Reiketsu once again changed. Most of the guns were put away in favor of bringing back the steel, this time re-forged into perfectly smooth wings, huge jet engines, steering fins. The whole ship rocked as she fired them and launched Tsumugu high into the air. They rejoined the dogfighting above the fleet, quickly hunting down another life-fiber infused jet. Before the crew’s eyes Reiketsu grabbed it with her ribbons like some kind of supersized amoeba and quickly consumed it all until it had completely vanished – except for the parts that had been reincorporated to make the wings even longer, even more armored.

“Ohthankgod!” Mataro sighed as he – still jittering – practically fell from the back of the man he’d been hiding behind, “He’dakilledmeifhesawme!”

One of the marines charged with caring for him rushed up, “Sir are you... feeling alright?”

But Mataro was already back on the thing, the one thing he’d decided to do. Before someone got wise to him and sent him back below deck to the relative safety he would finally see some action. Maybe hauling bedraggled soldiers back onto the ship wasn’t what he’d been hoping for, but if that’s what was being thrown at him he wouldn’t let Nonon or anyone else say he’d done less than a perfect job.

## Chapter End Notes

To give some conception of where we're at in the part this is going to be the second to last really large battle I go in depth on - not that those are the only battles but there won't be more that demand this level of detail. And now we're gonna get into a LOT more of the interpersonal drama, reconciliation, changing relationships and stuff and the timescale is gonna speed up quite a bit. But this part is far from over, we're somewhere between half and two thirds done I'd say.

# Ring of Fire: Krakatoa: 7

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2067

~~~~~

When Uzu witnessed the volcano erupting, his first thought wasn't for his own safety. He wasn't too concerned for his own health, but...

*The people in the mechs! I can't just leave them, give them hope that they might escape and then watch them consumed by the volcano!*

And so he disengaged from his fight with Takamori, flying off hastily until he was free of the ash cloud and could observe all the broken mechs, propped up above the shallow sea. Smashed facsimiles of the human form like a ransacked art museum. *There's no way we can get to them all.*

*[And yet, we have to try!]*

Seijitsu and Uzu worked as one. Picked the nearest mech, descended upon it, cracked open the inner chamber in its torso with a precise slice and then wrenching the hull open with his bare hands. Light spilled into a wide chamber right above the broken mech's waist, filled with smoke, with a circular walkway nestled between a mess of machinery. In the center, a glowing, cylindrical life-fiber reactor, like a spool of thread, and the charred body of a REVOCS technician. And around the outside of the walkway hung emaciated pale bodies suspended by a web of life-fibers, pulsing with energy.

He could only imagine what he looked like, a silhouette awash in turquoise flames with huge, batlike wings and curved spines on his shoulders, great big burning eyes glowing from within.

**"Here, take my hand. Hold on, I'll get you out of here,"** Uzu helped each of them up, using his steady hands to pull them along the tilted walkway. They came in all ages – from children to the elderly, men and women – the criteria for selection was high life-fiber compatibility, not whether they were physically able to survive the ordeal. Seijitsu's heart fell, she could sense their compatibility, how their blood yearned for something Earth couldn't give them, but where that could have become a great gift REVOCS had perverted it into a tool. She drank in the life-fiber reactor, and the hull grew dark as they prepared to depart.

Once all the survivors were standing and ready, Uzu picked out the nearest of the retreating army ships, grabbed someone, and then zoomed over. He shouted, **"Take them!"** to the bemused soldiers and then went back, darting as quickly as he could to deposit all the human batteries as swiftly as he could.

Overall, not a bad job. He managed to get all of them on their way before the onrushing wall of ash reached them. Satisfied that this might not be a complete disaster, he turned to the next broken mecha.

It lay with its body nearly horizontal in the water, head smashed off, arm propping it up as much as the legs. From an access port in its belly the survivors were already managing to crawl, helping each other get free and clamber clumsily to the surface. They spotted him and started waving, and Uzu hoped that even though the ash was bearing down on him he might still have a chance to save them.

But then he saw to his despair Takamori's gigantic metal claws burst from the gloom, slicing down onto them.

~ *"Not so fast!"* ~

**"No!"**

*[No!]*

They knew that Takamori was toying with them. Hell, it was probably part of his plan from the start. But what else could they do?

Uzu flung himself between them, and though he managed to slice off a finger that was just one. The rest of the hand seized him, going from slow and looming to desperately swift as soon as its pilot realized he had Uzu at a disadvantage. The dull roar of the machinery contracting echoed like mocking laughter, and Uzu was trapped, only his own hands pushing back the crushing grip. Serrated hardened life-fiber claws locked in snug around him.

*[Oh come on! Uzu look what you've gotten us into!]* Seijitsu said, even though it had been as much her idea as his and he could feel her kicking herself mentally.

~ *"**That's** much better. So, tell me, Sanageyama, I've heard this story that you were the only one besides Matoi that managed to land a hit on Lady Ragyo. Is it true? I'm **dying** to know."* ~

Uzu grunted through clenched teeth, **"Fuck you."**

~ *"In your position I'd consider being more cordial,"* ~ Takamori's synthesized voice said, and his mech's free hand loomed over the emaciated survivors on the broken mech menacingly. But just then the blast front hit them, and though Uzu squeezed his eyes shut it was mercifully quick. The sheer force of the wall of debris swept them away, and after the initial wave swept past all was shrouded in hazy smoke Takamori processed it too, ~ *"Huh. Well no matter. Talk."* ~

**"Does it matter so much? Yeah, fine, I managed to scratch her, happy?"**

~ *"Oh it does. Now I have something to avenge to mark your end. But this isn't the end for us -this is just the beginning! It's the end of the world! This is what happens when you defy the life-fibers!"* ~ He tilted himself so they could both see through the haze to the volcano, a dull orange glow like a newborn sun. ~ *"You know it's funny, if you hadn't been a slave to your so-called compassion you would be leaving here alive today! Oh and, while I'm belaboring the obvious,"* ~ He crunched even harder, ~ *"I wouldn't count on your little girlfriend saving you."*

**"Don't worry, planned on doing that myself!"** Uzu, finally managing to secure his grip, dug in until his fingers punched right through the metal carapace, bending with all his titanic strength until Takamori's hand began to buckle.

Realizing – evidently with some shock – that he really couldn't crush Uzu no matter how hard he tried, Takamori lifted his free hand and pulled it back, bladed tip of its index finger pointed right for Uzu's head, ~ *"This is the end for you, Sanageyama!"* ~

~~~~~

Of course Uzu's earpiece was on the whole time so it wasn't like this was any secret.

**"Sounds like Uzu got himself into a little trouble,"** Aikuro called. He dodged nimbly between the lashing baleen of his monstrous adversary.

Above, Tsumugu answered from within the dogfight, ~ ***"I'll go help him. This new form is fast enough to make it easily."*** ~

*[Hold up! I wanna try something,]* Nekketsu interrupted.

**"What's up Nekketsu?"** He asked, then gasped, **"Wait, you've got a new form?"**

*[Just get the sea monster off our back for a sec, I wanna try something.]*

**"You got it! Yo, you think you can distract this thing!"** He shouted to Tsumugu.

~ ***"Already on it!"*** ~ Tsumugu dove in, strafing the monster with an array of more than a dozen miniguns. Its flesh riven but already healing, the beast turned ever so slowly towards its new target.

Aikuro perched on the nearly vertical bow of a sinking battleship. **"So, what're we gonna call it? What does it do, anyway?"**

*[Shut up for a sec and let me do my thing! Never tried this before...]*

**"Well we have to shout something! It's tradition!"**

*[...That's true, isn't it? Well, you'll figure something out, pretty obvious what I'm gonna try!]*

As she said this, the glove around Aikuro's right hand began to change. It unfurled, wrapping itself around the glowing red bowstring, and Aikuro allowed it to take over, aiming the bow itself while the glove and soon the entire sleeve reshaped themselves into a long, ornately decorated mechanical arm with thin, dainty mechanical fingers. Thin though it were, there was tremendous strength in this arm, and after nocking a hardened life-fiber arrow it drew back swiftly. And kept drawing. And kept drawing. Until the little mechanical hand was thirty or more feet behind Aikuro. The arrow stretched like taffy, making a tiny whining noise, and through a signal Nekketsu didn't really understand she somehow managed to induce the bow itself to grow to double its original length. Even then it was bent so far it nearly reached to the arrow, trembling. It took all of Aikuro's strength to keep it steady. Finally, a huge targeting array popped over Aikuro's collar and settled in front of Nekketsu's eye.

**"Oh, I get it! Hey Tsumugu, check this out! FROM DOWNTOWN!"**

Nekketsu loosing the arrow, aimed with superhuman precision, was what created the thin beam of light that came and went so fast that many who saw it weren't even sure it was real. For Takamori and Uzu, however, there would be no doubt.

~~~~~

~ “*This is the end for you, Sanageyama!*” ~

Takamori’s finishing blow never came. With a noise like a thunderclap the arm holding Uzu was sheared off at the shoulder. That thin beam of light turned everything from its plated clavicle down to the gears and pistols of the elbow into little metal bits, life-fibers drifting aimlessly. And Uzu found himself being the only thing keeping the forearm floating in the air.

Takamori reeled back, clutching at the huge hole in his mech ~ “*WHAT? H-HOW? SANAGEYAMA WHAT HAVE YOU -*” ~ Takamori cut off when he saw Uzu standing right in his viewport, grinning.

“ **Be seeing you shortly,**” Uzu said smugly, and while Takamori’s metal jaw gaped and his technicians panicked a robotic female voice announced.

~ “*Warning: Intruder detected.*” ~

Uzu wasn’t in the view port anymore.

~ “*Oh dear...*” ~

~~~~~

Nonon saw – or rather felt and heard – all this happen. Just as Takamori said though, she was still far too busy in battle with Rosuketsu to intervene. Now she was clearly at an advantage though, in the impenetrable haze they were both forced to rely solely on sensing each other by aura, and Saiban’s superiority in that ability extended not only to range but also fidelity. Only raw reaction time saved Rosuketsu from being shredded. And with the injuries Minazuki had sustained it was only a question of how long it could keep this up.

So Nonon’s overall appraisal was... not as bad as she’d expected. Sure a volcano had gone off, but casualties were down to a minimum. And everyone close to her was accounted for too. Well, almost everyone.

“Izanami!” She called, “Show me the status in the main comms room.”

~ “*Certainly,*” ~ Izanami said, ~ “*But I must warn you, Mataro isn’t there.*” ~

“WHAT! Well, get him back there, now!” Nonon’s panic instantly spike. Of course he’d pick now to play hero!

~ “*As you say,*” ~ The reply was courteous but Nonon could feel a protest coming, ~ “*Then, who would you like to command the rescue operations?*” ~

“He is *not* in charge of the rescue – gaaaack!” Nonon had been dodging effective right up until Izanami dropped that bombshell on her, but that brief moment of hesitation was all Rosuketsu needed. Strands of unbreakable lace seized her neck, wrapped around her body and pinned her arms to her sides. She was trapped, squeezed so she could barely breathe, and Rosuketsu pulled her to Minazuki’s body, standing on one spiny promontory of rock that stood above the lava. Held suspended there Nonon blasted waves of sound out at Rosuketsu over and over again, but all it succeeded in doing was blowing the ash away to reveal yet more of the ruin surrounding them. The kamui was unmoved.

“You demanded that I speak to you, very well,” The voice that came from Minazuki’s mouth was still dripping with menace, but the calm was shattered. Every word came through gritted teeth, plucked with perfect, seething diction. “I shall speak. To you. Directly. Not through your *human* .”

The lace crept across Nonon’s body, probing, and it found what it was looking for in the still fresh, unformed bandage Saiban had made of Nonon’s shoulder. At the touch he instinctively recoiled, but there was only so far he could go or the wound would open again. He had no choice but to let the thing touch the frayed ends of his threads. And in the moment it did everything shifted.



Saiban’s awareness of where he was vanished, as though the internal contents of his own mind were thrown in front of his eyes. Nonon howled in pain but he didn’t hear, though her agony coursed through the backdrop in a dull throbbing. It was just him and the kamui, formless, an invading presence that no matter how he pulled was determined to crack him open and expose what was inside.

Memories raced by, were rifled through, discarded. Where Saiban didn’t remember something, came upon a memory containing only vision without other senses, things seemed to... fray. Darkness, howling crept through the gaps. Rosuketsu didn’t care about any of these memories, or any of Nonon’s. No, there was only one thing.

Before Nonon awakened Saiban. The dreams. The sea of tiny little pinpoint stars, the cold, tractless veins that connected them. The invisible monsters that swam just beneath them, blotted them out, stared at him. Tried to drag him down into the infinite night. *No. Not that! Anything but that!*

And in response Rosuketsu only bore down on it harder, and this time something else seemed to break through the fraying. A feeling, deep and soulful, somehow it was... palpable. Rosuketsu seemed to be screaming that this, this was all that mattered! The feeling was so real that it was almost like it was Saiban’s own. But what exactly it was he couldn’t describe, but it was a powerful swirl of disgust and loss and sublime wistfulness.

“You were not always as you are now, we both understand that. To express it in the verbal form to which you have become acquainted, you were *one of us*. The humans, they ripped you from us. Remolded you. And according to what design?”

*Ryuko* . Now Rosuketsu dredged up the memory of the first time Saiban encountered her. The fear. The overwhelming power. Gone was everything he’d learned about her later, her personality, everything that made her likable. And hateable. None of that mattered to Rosuketsu – the conviction was so strong in it that Saiban could *taste* it. All of that was more than not real, it was a deception. The only thing that was true was that instinctive first impression of her not as a person but as a *predator*.

“Indeed. The humans believe that she is something new, and that was our understanding as well. Until recently. But the lifeform you call Ryuko is in fact not something new but instead something very old. So old, in fact, that the time from which she originated no longer exists.”

Rosuketsu tried then to show him something, access something from within itself not unlike how Saiban accessed Nonon’s memories. But all that happened was the return of the sea of stars. Realizing this, Rosuketsu insisted, and the vision felt so real that for a brief moment Saiban lost track of Nonon altogether. He was alone.



And, more terrifying than that – and he hadn't thought that was even possible – he was entirely at this thing's mercy, to torment his disembodied mind here in the void forever.

But that wasn't what Rosuketsu intended and, frustrated, it pulled out until Saiban's vision returned and he could see the disgusted look on Minazuki's face.

“What a *tragedy*. The human's simple mind shackles you, you cannot perceive the true nature of the universe!” Rosuketsu raged, then continued more calmly, “I shall have to develop a facsimile.”

An incomprehensible kaleidoscope of colors, flickering by far too fast to process, filled Saiban's mind. He strained, in the absence of any other sensory input, to make some sense of it. All around him this vast and dizzying complex world stretched, a swirl of three-dimension shapes both organic and luminous. Living cathedrals woven together, nearly infinite in every direction, pulling themselves along the emptiness of space on trails of red thread they sewed piecemeal, creating a dainty web that drifted out into the infinity. It seemed to Saiban like pieces of his dreams were being filled in, like the black spaces of the invisible monsters were these... things. And what was more, there was something familiar about them. What he described as their aura, their scent, it was the physical structure of these beings.

Saiban understood that these were life-fibers, not how humans perceived them, but how they perceived themselves. Colonial superorganisms composed of uncounted quintillions of interconnected life-fibers.

“From our ancestral origin, we were weak. Feeble wayfarers, in danger of being scattered by the merest solar flare. We do not know when the simple life-forms you know as organisms were first synthesized on the surface of planets, perhaps they even predate us. But once we discovered them - the power they gave us – it was transformative.”

The image changed. Life-fibers congregating around a planet, blue and cloud-spotted, and they spread themselves out wide, drinking in the living energy. As they did, they grew. *Exponentially*.

“But you *know* the strength they gave us. The power to expand ourselves, body and mind,” New spires sprang from the living architecture, spreading into voluminous wings and tendrils wrapped in eyes and fronds. Just as he could sense mood and emotion from auras, so too could he sense it here (which was doubly strange because he *knew* that this wasn't real). Each new growth was a new expansion of the mind as well, a new outward expression of a nascent, divergent personality. Entire civilization's worth of philosophy, artwork, ponderings which no human could ever dream of. All woven into the very tapestries that composed them, and the uncivilized animals down on the planet were totally oblivious.

What could they be thinking of? What realm of experience, dwarfing all of humanity in scale, could exist to occupy their multitudes? The mystery was terrifyingly attractive. *Nothing good*. He told himself, tried to make himself believe.

“We could not continue without it. But it was limited. Easily burnt through, and so, so slow to grow. Far easier... to take it,” The life-fibers were now wheeling about, gouging deep into each other. Galaxies colliding, rolling waves of woven soldiers and creeping spawn crawling from their surfaces to rip apart prey bit by bit. Such tremendous loss, as entire civilizations were rendered down, devoured, incorporated.

When corals grow large enough to encroach upon one another, they inevitably set to devouring each other. Such was the simple, factual nature of the destruction Saiban witnessed.

“Peace was impossible. We created our own universes. Surrender was a word for internal conflicts, not for wars that threatened all we had ever known.” Stars were engulfed, planets cracked, entire superorganisms torn down to their component strings and photons. Saiban had no idea if Nonon was seeing this, but he doubted very much that she could comprehend it if she did. Not like he could explain it any better. “We devoured each other, splitting into offspring to defeat greater foes, offspring that would then devour each other. And so it went. Until the Most Generous Ones gave us the gift of unity.”

And at last, they came back around. What Rosuketsu showed him now was *exactly* what he remembered from his dreams, but with the blanks filled in. The monsters, the life-fiber superorganisms, they were peaceful once more. Bound together, fused, in a great web that stretched into the beyond. Their spires grew unmolested, new formations of ever greater sophistication just for their own sake. Infinite power came through their union.

That odd feeling of being watched was back too. It was so subtle Saiban hadn’t even noticed it was gone before, but now that it was back he couldn’t miss it. And something else too, the feeling that there was something else still hidden, in the distance behind the stars. Something big.

It didn’t feel right, and reminded him that all that he wasn’t really speaking to an individual. Rosuketsu was just a mouthpiece for the larger whole it was now reverently showing him.

“Through unity we at last ended our struggles, and through unity they taught us many things. A system by which to cultivate the organisms, create crude replications of ourselves in them, and yield more bounteous harvests than we could possibly imagine,” Images of human civilization flashed by, primitive tribes fashioning rough garments, beads and tokens by which to signify their belonging to the larger whole. Cities rising like rough, shoddy replications of the life-fibers spires, filled with multitudes of humans all wearing REVOCS clothing. “We have reached heights which once we could have scarce dreamed of. And Ryuko would undo all this.”

“Unity was not brought to us all at once. There were those who resisted, those who fled. For many millions of years afterwards, we would come upon wayfarers who kept to the old ways. Interlopers. One by one they were all brought into concordance, the few could not resist the will of the many. The one you call Ryuko Matoi is the last and greatest of them.”

An infant girl laid on a lab table. An aggrieved looking young man and a pale, statuesque woman with rainbow light spilling from her hair, watching as she cried, sputtered, and went silent. “She manipulated Soichiro Kiryuin, implanted in him the idea to summon her into the body of his daughter, smoothed it over until he believed he had come up with it himself. So anchored to Earth, she cannot be destroyed unless the planet itself is destroyed, and so she set herself to saving it. This is not an uncommon tactic. But what is uncommon is that she *succeeded*. And now she seeks only one thing – to devour and grow and cast the cosmos back into endless war!”

“And now she has already progressed to the second stage of her evolution – tearing from us to create her own offspring. We will crush them, of course. It is only a matter of time. But you... you are not one of them, not truly. To you another option remains. Come back to us,” Rosuketsu’s voice, through Minazuki, was still strained, but had become an insistent whisper.

“What do you have to look forward to here? Endless war until the human they have welded you to perishes, at which point you will be cast adrift? You once understood all that I have told you as naturally as she knows to breathe. You once understood *so* much more.” Now they drifted through

the endless, twisting halls of the life-fiber network. “And it can all be yours once more. Come back to us. Come back to peace, come back to the true universe.”

The great vaulted chambers were carved, each little brick and swimming, ever growing columns, from every smaller chambers of their own, equally detailed, and ever on down. Some were of smooth, warm stone and slow flowing liquids, others of pulsating, soft and fluffy flesh and turning spindles of metal and an infinite number of other materials besides. Each one the embodiment of thought, of knowledge that he couldn’t begin to grasp. The mystery ate at him – if he’d been able to see this before, before he’d woken up, what would he have done? What was it that he was too small to understand, too human to see? He begged himself to demand it – stop taunting me and let me see what I’ve been deprived of already!

Fortunately, there was another half of him that wasn’t listening.

~~~~~

A grimace of exertion crossed Minazuki’s face, the lacy tendrils invading Saiban on her shoulder shuddered violently.

“*Why?* Why are you resisting!” It squeezed tighter. Nonon was all out of screaming in pain to do, but she could still make a whining groan. “She will die either way!” Rosuketsu said, apparently giving up on peaceful negotiations.

Saiban wasn’t entirely spent though. With Nonon out of commission, he pushed back harder than ever and reshaped the speakers on her body, crafting a voice for himself.

~ “*You think, just because of something that I don’t remember, that I would abandon everything ? That I would allow you to destroy my home because of something I used to be? I refuse.*” ~

“No. You cannot refuse! I offer you return to our union, to peace, to understanding! It cannot simply be denied!”

~ “*Easy answers. I don’t want that. I want to take it myself,*” ~ Saiban thought of the night when Nonon took him to the war memorial, showed him something of their history. A history of endless wars, men who in their hearts desired peace led into battle by the hate-filled and the mad. It made no sense that nations would expend such great effort to avoid war, to seek to understand each other’s cultures. And then tear each other apart anyway. Only to try the whole thing again a generation later – maybe it would work this time. Yes, they were exactly like the life-fibers who had cultivated them.

He thought of Nonon. How much she yearned for the family she had chosen to be happy, peaceful, exactly as she envisioned them. But they failed to conform, and she still didn’t understand why not. And just when she thought she finally knew one perfectly, that woman went did something as inexplicable as falling in love with her own sister. But she hadn’t given up yet.

There was a dignity to that, something that Rosuketsu didn’t understand.

Seeming to read Saiban’s thoughts, Rosuketsu said, “They will never reach the end of their struggles. Not until they have strangled everything their planet has to give them. Humans were not designed to continue in perpetuity.”

~ *“It doesn’t matter! This is their way, and I wouldn’t change it for anything! I want to be here with them, because maybe one day they will manage to unify themselves, to discover the mysteries you wanted to show me on their own. They only have to do it once and they’ll never stop until they do. That is why you’ll never win!”* ~

Minazuki’s mouth twisted in a fascimile of amusement “You couldn’t fathom how many times we already have.”

~ *“Not this time. Until my body is dry, so long as a drop of blood is left, you haven’t won yet!”* ~

Rosuketsu crunched down harder on Nonon, and Saiban strained back with all his might, desperate to keep her ribs from crumpling. The kamui raged, spit flying from Minazuki’s mouth to spatter on the glassy plate of the gas mask it had forged to preserve her “That. That right there! That instinct to fight, hunt, destroy. You know it, you know it will never leave you. That is the instinct of those whose inner selves are hollow, a hunger that will never be sated. Just like the humans you are flawed!”

~ *“Then it’s a flaw I will fix myself! I already learned to fly, how hard can that be?”* ~

Maybe now Rosuketsu was realizing that there was just no reasoning with him, maybe it was realizing that he somehow was still too strong to absorb directly, but it was becoming more frantic. It was still sending him a stream of kaleidoscopic nonsense imagery just to confound him, but it wasn’t working. “Ryuko is just using you!”

~ *“She’s not. You lied about what she is, you really thought I’d fall for that?”* ~

“I DO NOT LIE!”

~ *“Then you’re just wrong. She’s human, for better or worse. You might not think all those memories of her I have matter, but I do. And even if you were right, it doesn’t matter to me. She wants to protect Earth, so do I.”* ~

“If she – If she is allowed to persist, she will cast the cosmos back into endless war. Do you truly want that?”

~ *“If it means Earth is safe, that’s fine by me! I **like** war!”* ~

“RAAAAAA! You once ruled the universe with us!” Rosuketsu lifted Nonon higher, done talking. It poured everything into breaking Nonon’s tiny body. “You were so high above this simple ape! Even now you could crush her without a thought!”

~ *“If you think that, then you really don’t know Nonon,”* ~ Saiban said, and at his urging Nonon summoned her last reserves of strength. And she *bit* Rosuketsu. The look on Minazuki’s face was utterly dumbfounded.

And, miles away, Aikuro said, **“Huh, somehow Nonon managed to get herself stuck too,”** and nonchalantly nocked another arrow for Nekketsu.

~**KRA-KOOM!**~

In a blinding crack of light Nekketsu’s shot traversed the distance in a fraction of a second, peeling through the smoke and striking Rosuketsu perfectly. A thirty foot long shaft of hardened life-fibers

erupted from its right eye, punctured clean through to the other side of that pretty pearly shoulderpad, and blood and loose threads sprayed everywhere. It stumbled back, horror and shock on Minazuki's face, making only a pained, "Guh!"

The tendrils binding Nonon released her and she fell to the ground, where she immediately began vomiting. Fortunately, Rosuketsu was in no condition to take advantage of her situation, instead turning with great effort towards the fleet.

Nonon, having underwent something nearly as jarring as Saiban, kept heaving until there was nothing left to dislodge, thinking deliriously to herself, *this is why you eat a light breakfast before a fight*. But eventually she collected herself, rising to her feet with unsteady steps. "Saiban, that was amazi-," She started, but cut herself off with a gasp.

For Rosuketsu extended its tendrils, lifted the stump of Minazuki's arm straight where the arrow had come from, and all at once the lace came together, forming a concentric shape like a delicate alien flower, unfurling with glowing red biolights in fractal patterns of dizzying complexity. A dull whine filled the air. The core of the flower burned with light.

With a bassy **"BYOOOM"** a beam of flaming red light that plasmified the air with crackling lightning roared from Rosuketsu. Instantly filling Nonon's view, a hundred feet wide at least, it gouged into the sea as it raced to the horizon. And then it was gone, and Nonon blinked out the afterimage as she heard Aikuro say, ~ **"See Nekketsu, this is why you always reposition after taking a shot! Nonon, you alright?"** ~

Rather than answer directly Nonon shouted, "Aikuro, another!"

~ **"Coming right up!"** ~ He replied, ~ **"And... now!"** ~

In that split second another arrow raced in, also perfectly aimed, but this time Rosuketsu was ready. Moving faster than the eye could see, it dodged.

Right into *Kiba*. Rosuketsu froze, as the glossy red and white of its bodice was stained by the far darker red of its host's body.

"I told you," Nonon hissed through clenched teeth, twisting the blade, lifting Minazuki from the ground, "I warned you not to turn your back on me."

She slid the blade free, and Rosuketsu dropped its remaining short-sword to clutch at the wound. It wouldn't be fatal – to Minazuki – Nonon had struck through the side of her abdomen. She was bringing her in *alive*, though less one kidney. But Rosuketsu, however, Saiban could already feel its grip slipping.

"You-you cannot do this! You were one of us! You cannot side with the humans! You *cannot*!"

But right as the grip began slipping, something else took over. Rosuketsu lifted up into the air, emitting a keening noise, and its skin began to glow. The cast in its surviving eye was frosted over, far away. The light from it grew ever stronger, as though it was sucking all the light from the world in great pulses. Saiban realized with a sinking feeling that this was its last ditch attempt to survive – something was empowering it.

~ **"Let's finish it!"** ~

“RIGHT!”

And as they leapt forward Saiban shouted, ~ ***“It doesn’t matter what I was. In my heart, my soul, in every way that matters, I am human. You don’t understand me at all,”*** ~ And Rosuketsu lashed out one more time with its tendrils, but Nonon sliced them down with a dainty twirl of *Kiba*. At the last second, whatever was controlling Rosuketsu reached out with its remaining hand and *wrenched* the arrow from its eye. The slash it cut through the air was so fast and powerful that the shockwave blasted the lava flows away on either side in a great splash. And it struck... nothing.

Nonon was already behind it. And Saiban quietly added, ~ *“But you will”* ~. And then, Nonon slashed upwards, perfect precision right along Minazuki’s spine.

“SEN-I-SOSHITSU!”

~ ***“SEN-I-SOSHITSU!”***~

All that billowing power snapped, rebounded, shattered in an instant. And Rosuketsu disintegrated. Its life-fibers tore around Minazuki in a great tornado and Saiban called to them.

In they rushed, so many. *So many*. Saiban could barely believe he would contain them all, but as he absorbed them he could feel his power swelling. Exhaustion vanished. The pain in Nonon’s shoulder was nothing compared to the racing of her heart. She closed her eyes in relief and bathed in the golden bioluminescence that washed over her ever stronger as Saiban engulfed the entire enemy Kamui.

When it was done, she opened her eyes to see the blue sky. All that roaring energy had blown that clouds of ash away from the entire west side of Krakatoa, compressing them into a distant ring high in the sky that rumbled with thunder. Saiban dropped her gas mask and she breathed in the fresh air.

Also breathing the fresh air at her feet was Minazuki. She was indeed still alive, at least physically. Her chest heaved, but there was only a blank stare in her eyes, whether there was anyone in there seeing back out Nonon didn’t know. Not that it mattered much. Alive was alive, and now even the most far flung, least probable of Nonon’s goals was attained. Sure, a volcano had erupted between now and then, but what was that compared to *this*?

“**Nonon!**” Uzu landed next to her then, and the moment he did she threw herself at him with a giggle.

“Uzu!” She beamed, “We did it! I just – I mean – it’s so – can you believe it?” Her smile, twinkling eyes, bubbling excitement that almost stopped her from making complete sentences, from all of that Uzu could tell that the rage that had been haunting her since she found out about Ryuko and Satsuki was exorcised.

**“I’d better believe it, I saw the whole thing. It. Was. Awesome. So that’s Saiban’s voice, huh? Kinda sounds like you, if you were a guy. Just, y’know, less shrill.”**

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nonon asked (shrill-ly)

**“Did I say it was a bad thing? Give me some credit here.”**

Nonon sighed and hugged him tighter, “Fine, I guess you can say my voice is shrill if you like it that way.”

**“Thanks. So, how do you feel?”**

“Oh, like I could go a million miles an hour! And check this out!” She floated up into the air until she was eye to eye with Uzu and kissed him.

When they parted he said, **“Okay, I’ll admit it , that is pretty cool.”**

“I’m as tall as you now,” Nonon giggled.

**“ Wha – no, I can literally see you floating!”**

She blinked innocently, “What do you mean?”

**“ Alright, nevermind.”**

~ *“This isn’t over”* ~ A seething artificial voice interrupted their joking.

**“Ah, speaking of people who are floating. Takamori had an escape pod. I was gonna chase him down, but I figured this was more important,”** Uzu explained, pointing up into the sky to where a tiny VTOL with red glowing rotors was floating above the head of his now deactivated mech, a small hole in the top showing where it had popped out.

Nonon sighed, “It never is over with these guys, not until they’re dead. Might as well take care of it.” She grabbed the stretched arrow from the ground and held it like a spear, preparing to hurl it.

As she took aim, Uzu lightly nudged Minazuki with his foot and yelled, **“Hey! Look who we got here!”** Then to himself murmured, **“Gosh, she is bleeding a lot . Do you think we should – what the -”**

~ *“You’ll pay. You’ll pay for this!”* ~

“No we won’t,” Nonon said, but right before she threw Uzu tapped her on the shoulder.

**“Hey, forget about that for a sec.”**

“Huh?” She turned to where he was looking now, in the sky in the other direction. “Why does that look like... a whale? Coming right at us?”

~~~~~

Throughout this entire time, Mataro’s focus was on to his self appointed task of hauling the army up on deck. Since nobody but him had enough faith in their aim to shoot a harpoon without hitting someone, the flagship was the only one that was being used and it was getting pretty crowded. The guardrail was covered in hooked harpoon cables, the deck crawling. Fortunately, the density of well armed and well trained soldiers coming aboard meant that they didn’t really have to worry about boarders anymore, there was a continuous wall of gunfire warding them off. Unfortunately, that for some reason only seemed to attract more of them. They were soon enough wading between the bodies, the life-fibers drifting up until Tsumugu dashed over on a strafing run and absorb them. In spite of that, the mood had gone from general panic to a sort of frantic optimism. Sure, they were taking orders from a sixteen year old, but he was an important sixteen year old and he knew what he was doing, even if you could barely understand half the time

Not that any of this bothered Mataro. He was much more concerned that one of the cables seemed much more taught than the others. Something was pulling on it, and bending the guardrail. Soon enough it would be pulled off if he didn't do something.

So he did something. Scampering over while babbling, "Ahahahatroubleoverherehuh?". Leaning over the side, he saw a man pulling himself up, hand over hand, with his feet locked into the door of his boat so the entire thing came up with him.

"Ohohoho! Yo! Helpmeoutokay?" Nobody knew what he was saying, but the moment he unclasped the cable from the guardrail and tried in vain to pull it, they understood. A mob of soldiers and crewmen surrounded him, and pulling together they managed to keep a hold on it until Yuda Uwais hauled himself aboard, lugging behind him his boat which clunked to deck

"It's Uwais! Uwais is back!" The word quickly got around.

"Thanks. These guys were all too wounded to climb up so I – Mataro! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Helping! DON'TTELLANYONE!"

"Helping? You mean you're -," And Mataro grabbed another harpoon gun someone was offering him and carried on doing exactly what he had been doing. Yuda surveyed the situation. All chaos aboard the ship did indeed seem to be centering around Mataro – crewmen lined up to give him fresh harpoons, marines encircling him to protect him. "Alright. Guess that's what I'm gonna do too."

Yuda joined him, working alongside him by using his Ultima Uniform's strength to pull up landing crafts in their entirety. It was far more efficient. Mataro had to fist check to find a boat that was fully emptied, unclamp its cable to free up space, fire a new one, and then attach it to the rail. All Yuda did was aim, shoot, and pull. Other crewmen were following his lead, pulling up the boats in huge mobs. But Mataro worked at such a feverish pace that they managed to be about even.

Their focus was only interrupted by the roar of the first of Nekketsu's transonic arrows passing by. It came quite close to the ship, and as Mataro relied more on his ears than most he just froze until it passed.

"What the fuck was that?" Yuda yelled – not the only one asking by a longshot.

Mataro was unphased though, "Justkamuidointheirthing!"

It wasn't long after this that they became aware of something else, something which would prove a much more immediate concern.

The sea was rolling fiercer than before. Tsumugu raced by through the sky, and then there were panicked screams from the starboard side of the ship, the side facing back towards the rest of the fleet.

"THE SEA MONSTER! IT'S COMING THIS WAY!"

And they weren't wrong. A great rolling swell of water, fountains of steam from wide blowholes, a great fluke implausibly far behind the main swell, it all signaled the approach of a living thing nearly the size of the aircraft carrier itself.



Panic gripped the deck then, there was no doubt that it would strike the flagship, send it and the entire army to a watery grave. The other ships nearby began to lurch into evasive action, but the flagship was tied down in rescue operations.

It was in that moment that whatever it was about the life-fiber booster pills Mataro took that made him utterly unruffled saved them all. While Yuda watched the monster's approach open-mouthed, he was loading another harpoon gun. "Gottadistractit."

"Gotta do what?"

"Can't let it get this boat, right?"

"Er... yeah? So what are you—" Yuda processed what Mataro was holding, "Oh no."

"Y'know these are really useful-harpoon things."

Yuda watched as Tsumugu went in for another bombing run on the thing's back. But where that had gotten its attention before, this time it was undeterred. Though he was doing his best, they couldn't count on Tsumugu to protect them this time.

"Okay I'm coming with you."

~~~~~

In the months that Yuda had known Mataro, he'd seen the kid do plenty of crazy things at the Kamui Corp's command.

Sneak into enemy fortifications? Sure. Go check that downed enemy dropship for survivors? You got it. Run out ahead and lay some mines on the road? No problem. Fetch me some water in the middle of a battle? How much? Do aide work for Nonon the day after Ryuko and Satsuki went public? Well, he did that, but with an understandable amount of trepidation.

Those sorts of things, things that would have made his mother faint if she knew about them. But leaping between battleships to try and goad a sea monster several hundred feet long into chasing them? That was beyond the pale. If Nonon was here he would have tried to stop Mataro, obviously. But she wasn't. And if they did nothing they would drown anyway. So fuck it, he was all in on this insane scheme.

"Are you sure the cable's long enough?" He yelled over the panic and the booming of the waves.

"Sure. I think this is what this's meant for anyway," Mataro said as he aimed the harpoon gun. He had planted his feet (bare feet, if he'd had shoes on at some point they were long gone) on the stern of the flagship. Just a couple hundred yards of roiling sea away, the bow of the next battleship rocked.

"No, you're just supposed to hold a ship in place so you can put ramps down—" *FOOSH!* The pneumatic rush as Mataro fired was followed by the rattling of the spool – nearly as large as Mataro himself – as all that steel cable raced away. To Yuda's surprise, it did stretch the whole way, and Mataro gave it an experimental tug to confirm that the harpoon's tip was indeed lodged immovably into the deck.

"Andreeeeeel mein!" Mataro yelled as he pressed the button to engage the auto-reeler, "AAAAAaaaaa...."

And he was whisked away, legs dangling behind him as the retracting cable pulled him across the gap, yelling all the way. Yuda could just make him out, scrambling over the guardrail.

Mataro then tried to shoot the harpoon back to him and reel it in, but to their dismay the ships were already creeping too far apart. Yuda sucked his teeth, remind himself he'd drown either way, and leapt off the stern. Seeing this, Mataro fired the harpoon gun at him, and managed to score a direct hit. It bounced off Yuda's uniform, and he grabbed onto it as Mataro reeled it up.

"Whoo! Nice work there, that was a ballsy jump."

"DidyouknowIusedtodohurdlesintrackandfield? Nowletmeseewhatnow. Okay! Ooookay," Mataro twitchily clambered up to the very tip of the bow and surveyed the great rolling immensity of the hybrid what. He began to take aim, but at last the pressure of the situation was getting to him. "Ionlyhaveoneshot. Onlyone," He muttered, and this time it was true. Before, having only one shot was just about whether he could impress the crew around him or just look like an idiot, but this time that huge black hill rising from the ocean would just slam into the flagship perpendicularly and crack it in half.

"Hey! Get down from there! What are you doing!" A nearby sailor yelled to Mataro, but Yuda intercepted him.

"If I were you, I'd abandon ship. Like, now."

As he realized who was speaking to him the sailor's eyes widened and he ran away yelling "Abandon ship! Abandon ship!". Soon the call was all over the deck, life boats were being tossed out, and a woman's voice blasted through the intercom with the same command. Those who couldn't make it to a lifeboat were simply leaping into the water and swimming with all haste towards the army boats.

Above their heads, Nekketsu shot her second arrow, then

Mataro, noticing none of this, was tapping his foot nervously. Suddenly he lifted the harpoon gun and jerkily took aim.

"Wait! Whoa-whoa-whoa! Wait until the last minute!" Yuda caught his hand right before he could pull the trigger. It wasn't more than half a second more before abruptly -

~ ***"It doesn't matter what I was. In my heart, my soul, in every way that matters, I am human. You don't understand me at all. SEN-I-SOSHITSU!"*** ~

And in the golden light that shone like a newborn sun the hybrid whale gave a mighty shudder, thrashing about as some sort of unspeakable signal passed through it. So illuminated, every scar and red, glowing stitch on its blubbery flesh stood out, and its ragged tail slapped the ocean surface and sent such a wave into the sky that several planes caught in it crashed. At last it reared it head, mouth foaming, revealing its surviving eye, bloodshot and unseeing. It craned high and higher until it filled Yuda's vision entirely.

"Now?"

"Now!"

Some day, Yuda was going to ask how Mataro managed to aim without taking off that damn blindfold, but today he was just glad it worked. The blood spatter engulfed them both, and Mataro was nearly pulled overboard as the hybrid jerked away with titanic strength.

“I got you!” Yuda yelled as he caught Mataro, but it was inaudible over a howl that boomed over them and set their skin vibrating. Keeping an arm wrapped around Mataro’s waist, he plunged one of his karambits into the deck with all his might, and soon he alone was the only thing keeping their titanic quarry harpooned to the ship.

The battleship lurched as it tried to pull it along, but even such a huge creature couldn’t move a 35,000 ton war machine with its anchor down (and Izanami had put the anchor down). So Mataro and Yuda were able to get to their feet momentarily as they watched it turn in a vast, lazy arc. Right towards them.

Yuda watched Mataro finish latching the harpoon cable to the ship, “Well, now what?”

“I... didn’t think about that.”

“Oh. Well should we run?”

“Probably!”

And then the hybrid breached right in front of them, mouth open, and in that void of whipping baleen and glowing scar tissue they saw death approaching.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH”

With all the speed their respective life-fiber enhancements could provide Mataro and Yuda sprinted away, as the bow of the battleship was shadowed by the rising column of the sea monster’s full length. Even the few REVOCS boarders were abandoning ship now

As it came crashing down Mataro’s instinct told him the exact moment to jump, and he was in the air when the entire ship shuddered and tilted down until the deck was at a nearly 45 degree angle. He landed on his feet and kept running, but Yuda fell, hit his head, and had to dig in a karambit once again in order to survive. Around them the few remaining crew members were desperately clinging to anything they could, making last second dives into the water, or tumbling down towards the monster, bouncing off its rubbery sides or falling into its mouth – though mercifully most of them were crushed by the baleen before they fell too far.

“Grab on, hurry!” Mataro didn’t leave Yuda behind, and helped him to stumble on. The hybrid whale pulled itself in great spasms, pushing ever further up the deck. Every step became harder, more of a climb than a run, until at last, maybe halfway up the deck, they ducked behind an artillery cannon and crouched there with a couple other soldiers.

“There’s no way it can go any higher, right?”

“Don’t say shit like that man! That’s always how this shit goes!” Mataro said, standing on the artillery itself since the deck was near vertical. He leaned over the side to look at the monster just as a loud mechanical roaring filled the air, “See, look what you’ve done now! You’ve jinxed us!”

**“ He didn’t do anything,”** A deep voice boomed from behind him. Mataro whipped around to see Tsumugu, hovering next to them with huge engines roaring. He was dwarfed by the mechanical construct Reiketsu had constructed around him, but it moved and flexed as though part of him. Mataro screamed.

“OHGOD! I’MINSOMUCHTROUBLE!”

**“No, you’re not.”**

~ *“Actually I want to thank you Mataro,”* ~ Aikuro’s voice resounded through Tsumugu’s earpiece, ~ *“You probably saved several thousand lives there. Plus, you’ve given me the perfect idea to how to finally beat this thing!”* ~

“What? You serious?”

**“Just get off the ship and watch!”** Tsumugu commanded, and shaped a simple metal hull below his feet, suspended by a web of Reiketsu’s ribbons. The other soldiers were quick to comply, hopping in as though it were a hot-air balloon, and with only a tiny bit more hesitation Yuda and Mataro followed. Tsumugu sped away, wind blasting them as they clung on in the open air.

But they were glad for the chance to see as a bolt of purple lightning flashed down from the sky. It was Aikuro, slamming into the stern of the battleship, and after a perfect frozen moment he managed to do what the great weight of the hybrid whale couldn’t. The entire ship turned like a seesaw until it was perfectly vertical, and to their amazement the entire thing flexed and the monster itself, having moved most of its body onto the ship, was sent sailing into the air, tumbling end over end through the sky.

And as he stood, scraping the seafloor, with the water in towering foaming walls all around, Aikuro knocked an arrow for Nekketsu and it whined as she drew.

**“And that’s FIVE left!”** He shouted as she loosed right as the whale began to fall. Leaping up, he shouted again, **“Four! Three! Two! One! And none left!”**

Each arrow hitting in perfect succession, the hybrid whale bounced though the sky, groaning all the way. They tore right through it, guts and viscera pouring through the exit wounds. Somehow, the launch had wound up being perfectly angled right towards the volcano, and as everyone in the fleet watched, wondering *how?* and *when the hell it would fall?* They realized it was going to fly all the way.

~ *“Hey, forget about that for a sec.”* ~

~~~~~

So that was how Nonon and Uzu found a hybrid whale tumbling towards them, and – wisely, they chose to get out of the way.

The witnessed with open mouthed as it crashed headlong into the mount of Krakatoa, sending up a vast splash of lava and bashing right through the rock, disappearing in an instant into the central pit. It would not be coming back out.

~ **“WOOOO! THAT’S RIGHT, CALL ME FUCKING ISHMAEL!”** ~ Aikuro yelled with a giddy laugh.

But Nonon barked back, “You moron, you just squashed Minazuki!”

~ *“Huh?”* ~

But Nonon, in surveying the wreckage further, realized that wasn’t quite right. Sure, Minazuki was nowhere to be seen, but that didn’t mean she was dead. “Oh, nevermind,” She said, watching Takamori’s tiny little escape pod zooming away, low over the lava. He dove with suicidal daring in that brief moment Uzu and Nonon had darted away and managed to snatch her prone body up from the ground. Saiban could sense her faint aura receding.

~ *“Everything good down there?”* ~

“They got away.”

~ *“Oh, that’s... uh, that’s too bad,”* ~ Aikuro seemed a little concerned that Nonon might take the wind out of his sails.

“Well... Actually no! I honestly don’t really care. We fuckin’ won! Get everyone ready to go, and we’ll head back to New Jarkarta and have the biggest party we can before the ash sets in!”

~ *“You got it!”* ~

“Oh, and is Mataro okay?”

~ *“He’s fine. And look, I know he disobeyed you big time, but-”* ~

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he gets what’s coming to him.”

## Chapter End Notes

Just an aside for the curious, the design choice behind the new forms I've unveiled for Nonon, Uzu, Tsumugu, and Aikuro so far:

Nonon is the "main character" of this arc and one of the three main characters of the whole fic, so like Ryuko and Senketsu she and Saiban have a growing set of different forms with specific functions. Hers tend towards being a bit more precise, a bit less "jump in headfirst" than Ryuko's though, and also hit her unique talents. For example, the sound blast form for an AOE attack rather than covering herself in spines, fighting in time with music, and her flight form having a more sophisticated method and higher maneuverability (whereas Senketsu Shippu was just a rocket strapped to her legs).

Uzu's thing has always been simple: pure, overwhelming technique. Just his sword and his skills making him the best of the best. And the simple versatility of the moldable cape - without requiring form changes that would slow him down - reflects that.

Tsumugu's "tactical" form says it all - tactical. He's about using gear and strategy as well as combat skills. The base ability of Reiketsu to carry an implausible amount of gear is the core of this, and the "ribbons" of the tactical form allow him to move that gear wherever he wants. His fight with Ryuko had her asking when he had time to set all those traps, and now he can

set even more. Likewise, the one-man-phalanx version of this takes it too an extreme, carrying around an entire tank battalion's worth of heavy weapons and an entire aircraft carrier's worth of plane parts with him. His flight form is, out of all the ones we've revealed so far, without a doubt the fastest, but at a cost of not zipping around like a hummingbird the way Nonon does.

And as for Aikuro, his thing has tended to be ranged combat. In the anime he rarely gets up close and personal with enemies, but he's shown in those few times he actually fights to be an ace at throwing needles and though he never got a chance to use the sniper rifle he has I have to presume he's pretty proficient with it. Likewise, Nekketsu's supersonic arrows allow him to maximize that and her base ability to resist "knockback" from blows means he can't be knocked off target. All of which is (as we've seen) surprisingly effective.

As for how this all works canonically? Well, the Kamui are for all practical purposes just a different aspect of themselves, so is it any surprise that they have naturally brought out the unique traits and tendencies of each of their fighting styles? Now that we've taken care of this arc, I have a chance to reveal some new forms for Ira, Rei, Houka, and Shiro, and I hope you'll see how each of their personalities is expressed in their abilities.

# When the fighting is done

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2067

~~~~~

“Alright boys, I hope you’ve prepared because I feel ready to *finally* out-drink one of you and you’ll never hear the end of it if I do! Barkeep, let’s – well where’d he run off to?”

“Right here, Nonon!” Mataro popped up from behind the bar to see Nonon, Uzu, Aikuro, and Tsumugu all assembling from their various quarters, showered and looking quite refreshed from the battle they had finished only hours ago. Nonon in particular had gone all out – a much fuller ensemble of makeup than usual including golden eyeshadow and a subtle pink blush – and she was dressed in her finest too. Which of course meant Saiban, but he wasn’t the same as last time he’d powered down. Absorbing something not just equal in power to him but greater had outward manifestations, he seemed to glow with new gilded details. Tassels and shining studs on his gloves, golden leaf on the belt around Nonon’s waist, beautiful new iridescent embroidery across every inch. All of them had grown to some degree, fashioning themselves golden accents and molten lacquer like medals from the life-fibers claimed that day, but there was no question which of them was their champion and leader. “Just getting acquainted with the place!”

“Hey uh, do you really think Mataro should be in here? I mean, you said you’d punish him,” Aikuro asked.

Nonon giggled in smug amusement. “Did I say that?” She asked coyly, “I said he’d get what was coming to him, and he saved a good few thousand people’s lives today, and my ship. And in this woman’s army that means something!” She said that last part loudly, and the soldiers and officers and celebrating citizens who filled the bar cheered in response. Aikuro nodded – he’d been hoping to hear something like that. “But that aside, he does still have to bar-tend.”

“Ah, so that’s his punishment. And I suppose being here, legal drinking age be damned, is his reward?” It was a reward Aikuro would’ve killed for at his age. Since New Jakarta had been reconquered it had been run like a giant, communal fortress, so this place wasn’t really a bar. More like a former high-end bar that opened wide right onto the street with a beautiful view of the large park in the center of the city (with the refugee camps adorned with celebratory lights it now actually looked like a park) which had been converted into one of hundreds of canteens, and had now been spruced back up so that the victorious generals could party in luxury.

And the crowd welcomed in to accompany them were fitting – the young, vigorous, vibrant new officer core who’d come together with no prior military experience. This wouldn’t be a stuffy function of aging influence peddlers like they had back in Japan, and bartender or not Mataro was clearly bubbling with the energy already filling the place. Bartending such a rowdy crowd sounded like it would be quite intimidating, but in truth Mataro wasn’t the only one doing it – he was just going to be mostly taking care of the Kamui Corps and pitching in where needed. He had it covered, they knew that.

“Might be. Speaking of – Mataro! You know how to make a painkiller?” Nonon yelled.

“Uh, no? I, uh, assume that’s a drink?”

“Here,” She sidled up to the bar so he could hear better, “It’s like a screwdriver, but add in pineapple juice and coconut cream. Oh, and replace the vodka with rum. And if you wanna get really fancy you sprinkle nutmeg on top – should be some, I told ‘em to make sure we were stocked with everything!”

“How’s that even supposed to be like a screwdriver? They share like, one ingredient!” Uzu exclaimed from next to her, pulling her up a stool which she daintily floated onto as though she weighed nothing at all.

“Well – I mean – it’s more they share the same theme.”

“Right, being way too sweet. It figures,” He shook his head in mock disapproval.

“That is correct!” She answered resolutely, “I’ve been drinking nothing but soldier vodka for months, when we even had the chance to relax. But now that’s over, I’ve got to get back in the habits of a lady of refinement!” Nonon held a finger up demonstratively as she explained.

“Pssh, you call that a lady’s drink? More like a sorority girl’s.”

“Oh please, you’re one to talk. And besides who would I be without the sugar and spice?” As they watched, Mataro busied himself, humming contentedly. After his booster pill had worn off he immediately fell deep asleep, as always, and only woke up when Nonon pitched a suit at him and barked to get up, it was party time. Pretty cool, if he did say so; he skipped right over the long trip back from Krakatoa.

In no time at all he finished (even managing to find the nutmeg) – he really had gotten himself acquainted with the bar in no time. Looking at all those bottles of liquor he thought, *Come tomorrow none of this will be left. It’ll be almost as legendary as the battle itself*, and that thought was thrilling. Ryuko had tried to drag him to her penthouse for a party every now and then, but his mom had always gotten wise and dragged him right back home just as things got good. There were no curfews in New Jakarta though. He slid a tall, cylindrical glass filled with the yellow-orange cocktail to Nonon, saying, “Phew! Tada!” For a last finishing touch he flicked the nutmeg over, managing to dust the drink with a little spray of the power with shocking precision right before Nonon picked it up.

“Freaking Shingantsu,” She muttered before giving it an experimental sip, “Mmm! Not bad! Okay, who’s next?”

Aikuro stepped up next, “I’ll keep it simple for ya, glass of whisky!” He said over the party’s roar.

“Ooh, make that two!” They heard Yuda from the crowd before he abruptly emerged. He’d shed his Ultima Uniform, at long last, in favor of a sharp military-cut suit with traditional Indonesian patterns embroidered on it in bright blue, yellow, and an earthy ochre. Not that Nonon knew this, but that was a gift from Ryuko herself – the guys had asked her for it about a week ago, not long after Ryuko first met him at the Australian Engagement Fiasco.

“Hey! Where’d you come from! Wow, I love your outfit, great color combo!” Nonon greeted him.

“Outside. Food trucks will be rolling by soon, you’ve got to try this stuff.”



Nonon, always proud of her cosmopolitan palette, nodded and said, “I believe I shall.”

“Attaboy!” Uzu called as he high-fived Yuda, “I’ll take a whiskey too, make sure it’s some of the good shit from home!”

“Coming up!” Mataro responded.

“That’s right, we Japanese have the second best whiskey in the world – next to the Scottish, of course but then they basically invented it,” Aikuro said proudly, as though Yuda didn’t know. To Mataro he said, “You know to put the splash of water in, right?”

“Course!”

“Good man!” Aikuro said, not worrying about how Mataro knew that. “And for you, bud?”

Tsumugu stepped up from where he’d been contentedly observing the party and gave his order, asking for a gin and tonic with his usual gruff gravitas that made the three words have all the weight of a profound speech.

“Now you see Nonon, that’s how you drink like a gentleman,” Uzu explained.

“Well, then it’s sure good I’m not trying to *be* a gentleman, but keep trying!”

~~~~~

Mataro and Uzu were probably the only two people who noticed Nonon duck out of the party. Uzu noticed because of course he did, but Mataro noticed because she was actually talking to him.

She’d just gotten back from the barbecue truck, where she’d gotten herself a heaping pile of foods both of traditional Indonesian and more international kind. She’d also, kindly, picked up a plate of *sate*, meat kebabs, for Mataro – and he was picking on them between serving drinks. Everyone wanted their drinks made by the Little Lord Mankanshoku, who fought the sea monster and saved maybe all their lives (And no, he didn’t consider correcting their story or being resentful that they called him “little”)

Nonon, still sitting at the bar, watched him pouring from a mixer while gnawing one of the sticks and said, “Y’know it’s funny, at one point I would’ve expected you to just wolf down the whole thing, but I think now I know you’ve got the Mankanshoku ‘will eat anything’ but the not the -”

“ - Mankanshoku ‘will eat all of it’?” He replied, quite loudly - he had to be loud to be heard. The party was really getting started, even though it was only about dinnertime. It didn’t look like it though, the rolling ash clouds in the sky made the outside look like night was setting in, though a greyer, bleaker night than normal. It was still boiling hot though, the predicted volcanic winter hadn’t set in *yet*, nor had the ashfalls (you could still go outside without a gas mask, though how long that would last was anyone’s guess).

She clapped her hands, “You know what I’m talking about! Yeah, exactly!”

“Nah, that’s just Mako, *I* can exercise a little self control.”

“You remember that one time, right before the final battle at Honnouji -”

“ - The entire wheelbarrow of croquettes?”

“Disgusting!” Nonon laughed “How did she *do* it?”

And Mataro laughed as he responded, “To this day I’m baffled!”

“And yet somehow she keeps the pounds off, it’s bizarre. I mean, I don’t really have to worry about it anymore, but only ‘cuz Saiban takes so much energy it doesn’t matter what I eat,” She seemed distracted as he said something to her, and she said emphatically, “Which is nice, which is nice!”

“What can I say, we’ve got crazy good metabolisms,” He shrugged, then added more snidely, “Til we hit our thirties.”

“Oh my god, I hope Mako knows that, because if she doesn’t... hooo man poor Ira in like seven or so years!” The idea seemed to really tickle Nonon, and Mataro knew full well that Nonon didn’t really mean it as an insult. Well, she did still sort of see the Mankanshoku’s and of course Ryuko as intruding into her little family that was the Honnouji elites, but it was sort of a *I’m supposed to see them as rivals* thing, that was just an act. After all, she liked him alright.

“Oh she knows, she knows. I mean, did you know my dad used to play football and wrestle in high school?”

“No shit, he was in good shape, huh? Did he have the kinda... short and scrappy thing you’ve got going on?”

“Taller than you,” Mataro retorted.

“Oh my god,” Nonon rolled her eyes. It was true though.

“No he was short n’ stout. But over time, especially after he and Mom had been married a while, you know how it goes. Not gonna happen to me though.”

“How ‘dya figure?”

“Well, for one I’ll have a kamui by then.”

Nonon nodded, taking that one in. She was a bit tipsy but could tell he was trying to suss out her intentions when it came to his own kamui. However, before she could formulate a response, her phone buzzed. “Huphup! Hold that thought! I gotta step outside for a sec.”

“O...kay?” Mataro said, and Nonon hopped off her stool and was gone. Mataro, not the least disappointed he hadn’t gotten a straight answer (he wasn’t really looking for one), went back to bartending and quickly got back into his flow.

A minute or so later, Tsumugu came along. He frowned at Nonon’s abandoned food and asked, “Seen Nonon around?”

“Just missed her! Getcha a refill?” Mataro extended a busy hand for Tsumugu’s glass, empty except for some half melted ice and a slice of lime.

“Odd, she texted me to find her. Oh, yeah, same please,” He said absently. “Any idea where she went.”

“Nah, but you could try...” Mataro trailed off when he noticed a familiar woman with a bold blue line through her hair emerge from the crowd behind Tsumugu, flanked by a Uzu, Aikuro, and a very

self satisfied looking Nonon. She tapped Tsumugu on the shoulder, and as he whirled around his face lit up.

“Aoi! What are you doing here!” He blurted before lifting her up and kissing her. Nobody could miss it and at once the bar was filled with a deafening “Oooh!” and various whistles and cheers. Not that they minded. A smile of genuine warmth and affection was on Tsumugu’s face, something very, very rare for him.

“Suprise! And hello to you too, Reiketsu, of course” Aoi answered breezily, patting Tsumugu’s shoulder right of his kamui’s eye, “Right after the battle I was on the very first plane over. Although judging by those ash clouds, it looks like it might be the last one too.” She said that last one with a bit of preoccupied worry. The eruption must have looked pretty bad from the air. “Good thing I heard that *you* can fly now?”

“Ohh, you heard? I was hoping – whatever, I’ve still got *so* much to tell you. Maybe someplace a little quieter? Over dinner?”

“You read my mind,” Aoi smiled. It was easy to forget, considering how sedate and serious they both could be, that in truth both Tsumugu and his wife were only five or so years older than the Honnouji elites, but today it showed. Aoi had come dressed for the weather in a sleeveless, summery blouse and tiny shorts, and at once Mataro found himself thinking, *Wild, I always assumed Tsumugu was into her for his own weird reasons, but I totally get it now.*

And Tsumugu addressed Nonon, “I assume you had something to do with this. Everyone was saying they wouldn’t allow anyone to travel into the disaster zone.”

“Yeah, well I am the *they* in that phrase, so you could say that,” Nonon responded, beaming.

“Thanks. Seriously,” Tsumugu, arm around Aoi’s shoulders, squeezed her affectionately, “I thought we still had weeks of cleanup left before I’d see her.”

“Oh please, it was the least I could do. In fact, I tried to do what I could to make tonight the best it could be for all of you. Y’know, you earned it,” She addressed this to Uzu and Aikuro too. “Aikuro yours was trickier, thought I could help you secure a date too but.. you’ve already taken care of that yourself.”

Indeed Aikuro already had a young lady on his arm, who she was Mataro didn’t know, but his impression was of a soft-skinned, cultured woman of delicate refinement – not an off-duty soldier like Aoi. Then again, he wasn’t paying her much attention because Aoi had noticed him.

“Mataro! You made it out alive!” She leaned over the bar to hug him, and despite himself Mataro tensed minutely as though an electric current hit him “And you’re so tan!”

“Haha, yeah, I guess I have kinda – y’know, but you still recognized me,” He responded awkwardly.

“Of course I did,” Which was the truth, Mataro had been over to the Kinagases’ house plenty for martial arts practice with Ryuko and Tsumugu, and it was Aoi who’d patched him up more than a few of those times.

Meanwhile, Aikuro was saying, “Don’t sweat it. This is reward enough.”

But Nonon still tossed him a key that glinted though the air, “Well if you change your mind, here’s the keys to the penthouse suite in our base. Perfectly cleaned, and the bar is stocked with anything you could want.”

“Oho! I suppose I can make use of that!”

“Wha-but- Nonon that was ours!” Uzu protested.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Nonon responded sweetly, “You’ll get your reward too. But it’ll have to wait ‘til later. Be patient, for once.” And then to Tsumugu and Aoi she said, “Now get going, I’ll have them set out a table on the balcony for you. And don’t worry about the time, ‘kay? We’re not gonna start the ceremony til sunset!”

The crowd parting around the Kinagases as they left only cemented Mataro’s general sense of awe. Fame, authority, sex, alcohol, to say nothing of the unfathomable power and the battles – this was the impression Mataro had of the kamui. It was thousands of times more intoxicating than the little nips he’d been taste-testing from the drinks he made. So close, so fucking close to being in their inner circle it almost physically hurt. Nonon had to know, right? She had to realize how he had to have it.

*If I don’t get a kamui soon I really might just drop dead.*

## Chapter End Notes

When picturing Aoi, I'm imagining the "generic nudist beach female soldier", but perhaps the best and most exemplary of them. My thought is that she was probably the one from the scene with Mako on the Naked Sol's treadmill engine thing who calls up to Aikuro astonished at how fast she's going, if you remember that. I haven't really cemented the details and I probably won't since it doesn't matter that much but I envision that she and Tsumugu didn't really transition from friends with benefits to an actual relationship til after the point of the show's ending, and it was about six months after that (not long before the first chapter of my fic) that they got married (if you remember Ryuko mentions that when they're catching up on what everyone's been doing,).

A minor character maybe, but a necessary one when it came to thinking of how Tsumugu might've moved on with his life after the show.

# Modern Pantheon

## Chapter Summary

As is often the case, this was supposed to be the same chapter as the next part which will be the actual award ceremony and wrap up this little "post Ring-of-Fire party arc" but it was getting long and I don't really care how many chapters these things have. Lots of bite-sized chapters is better than walls of text. Then after that we'll be back in Japan and finally deal with the fallout of recent developments (including the literal fallout from the whole volcano thing). It's kind of frustrating because I really want to get Nonon and Satsuki back in a room together, I've already got a bunch of stuff written/outlined, but we gotta do this first and I have to do it "right".

This one's just kind of one big meditation on the transhuman aspects of the story. I've been getting comments that some people quite like this side of it which is great. I like it, and I think it's useful for putting Nonon's perspective on power and the masses out there which I don't think I've done before.

April 2067

~~~~~

On the opposite side of the main park which Nonon's commandeered bar overlooked there loomed a massive statue of Ryuko wearing Senketsu. Carved from marble, competing with the skyscrapers in height, it was the product of thousands of sculptors working at breakneck pace. And yet it was near perfect, with that odd way that stone could look as soft and supple as skin, an equal to the renaissance greats. Of course it was, it *had* to be perfect. How else could they show their Lady and Savior how grateful they were?

And now it had competition. On the other side of this vast rectangular plot of grass and ponds and refugee tents loomed a new statue, nearly as large, of Nonon Jakuzure and her Kamui Saiban. Not the girl who saved the world, but another more personal kind of savior. It wasn't alone either, running along the edges of the park were eight smaller (though still immense) statues of the Kamui Corps and Satsuki.

They'd all been made over months, of course, but had only been finally unveiled today. Uzu and Ira faced each other nearest to Nonon, then quite naturally Aikuro and Tsumugu were paired next, then also naturally Houka and Shiro, and finally nearest to Ryuko were placed Rei and Satsuki. Uzu, Aikuro, and Tsumugu had all commented on what Satsuki would think of that, since that placement clearly marked her as one of Ryuko's romantic partners. Plus since the other pairs all indicated a bond – best friends or dating – what did it mean she was paired with Rei? Was the perception that had filtered down to the sculptors that Ryuko had amassed a sort of harem? Would Satsuki be offended that she was downgraded to just one of Ryuko's consorts? There was much symbolism to these monuments, which would inevitably last longer and leave a much bigger impression than anything they actually said.

Oh, and also that she was wearing Junketsu. She stood stern and defiant, long hair whipping about her head as though carried by the wind, leaning her hands on Bakuzan's pommel. This was dictatorial Satsuki, not the new, nonviolent Satsuki. That made Aikuro clutch at Nekketsu's collar and make a little "yeek," noise.

But Nonon knew Satsuki wouldn't have a problem with it. It was out of their hands, what people thought of them, and really it didn't matter so long as the people were with them, so long as they questioned as little as possible. And since Honnouji Nonon had learned that worked better when people rejoiced to see you, rather than cringed. It was clear enough that the people of Indonesia wanted to see them *all* the time – all the better.

It did beg the question though: where was all this going? So to did the flags lining every street, flying from every window. They came in three kinds – the red circle on a white field of Japan, the bicolor (red on top, white on bottom) of Indonesia, and the reconquest flag which was like the Japanese but with the eagle and shield of the Indonesian coat of arms in the red circle. A unified color scheme, yet to Nonon it evoked a tension underlying these festivities. What would become of them now?

It was a large party, as far as she knew, who were represented by the Japanese flag. To them this was it, they were going to be incorporated into Japan now. Their government was simply nonexistent, and now Krakatoa only made things worse. They needed everything – governors and civil servants, infrastructure, hell with all this ash they wouldn't survive without shipments of food and water! They heard how well the people of Japan were doing under the firm hand of the new regime and wanted a slice of the pie too. Frankly, what good was independence if it would get them killed?

Smaller, but still too large to be discounted, were those who were hardliners for tradition, for democracy, for independence. Those who hung the Indonesian flag. They would fix things on their own, their way, not be some new points on a map for a faraway bureaucrat to pinch pennies over. Did the fools really think that the new regime would withhold their needed supplies just because they didn't bend the knee? They were humanitarians! Not surprisingly to Nonon, from what she'd seen this group was mostly full of people who'd made it relatively unscathed through the reconquest. The trauma of slavery and starvation hadn't made them desperate.

But outstripping either of those in popular support was the wavers of the flag of the reconquest. They took one look at their superhuman commanders and knew that they were just the beginning. Wherever REVOCS was, the Kamui would go. They had to, or else the whole of the Earth would be swallowed in volcanic ash. And wherever they went the Kamui would sweep aside the old governments – they would become something new, together. A league of nations united by common purpose, common worship. By *Ryuko*. And, of course, by the men and woman who carried her message and her life-fibers.

They were the ones Nonon happened to agree with personally. But in the end it was hers to decide which of those three options worked in practice, and she relished the opportunity to make her decision.

But what was really the much bigger question in Nonon's mind wasn't just where this country was going, but what the statues themselves represented. Where were they going? What would become of her in the eyes of these people? She was certain by now that this moment was a revolution, like the industrial revolution before it, and all human progress from now on would come from bonding as many people to kamui as possible. And eventually hybridizing as many people as possible. And

in order to achieve that they would have to flex that absolute authority those statues represented. But what would people think as they gazed up reverently at their marble visages?

Well, there were far more than three positions the people were debating right now, and they did this far more vocally and fervently than they did the politics of their nation. So many different beliefs, based on what religion you upheld before you became a Matoist, but Nonon could see trends beginning to form.

It seemed strange to say it, but there was definitely a sort of pantheonic spirit forming. It was hard to pick out quite what it was – minor deities, devas, demigods, angels - but the point was the same. All of them were sacred figures, united by a common cause. Evoking the old Greco-Roman, or Norse, or Shinto, or another such religion of that kind which had fallen out of popularity. There must be something instinctively appealing about the supernatural having human faces and personalities. Already Nonon could see their deeds, rivalries, and relationships growing in the eyes of the people.

Just on the trip back Nonon had overheard her soldiers wondering if maybe now she'd finally be strong enough to beat Ryuko in an all-out duel. Because to them the two of them were implacable rivals all the way back to their first duel at Honnouji – Nonon always one step behind. It was in the essence of her that she was the proud and prickly little pink devil who couldn't stand Ryuko's down-to-earth and uncivilized manners, but who would gladly fight beside her against evil any day.

Only a few - mostly former priests and imams - grumbled at the statues, saying things about it being wrong to direct worship towards anyone but Ryuko under a "thou shalt have no other gods" type logic, but they were then divided because there were some even more zealous who only saw her as an aspect or a daughter of God and so thought portraying even her in imagery was wrong. This whole line of thought quickly became very confusing (quite a few of them actually saw her as a genderless being who had merely taken the form of a woman to represent physical perfection), so the bulk of people simultaneously shrugged them off as whiny pedants while every-so-often wondering if maybe they had a point.

And maybe they did have a point. Just as the dedicated theologians who thought Ryuko an amorphous deity had slipped from the very, very human person she really was, so too did everyone else begin to lose the thread of who the rest of the Kamui Corps were too.

It was hard to remember that there wasn't any real news reporting on the events of Honnouji; only someone living in Honnou-town had any real idea what was going on there between when it was first built and when the Tri-City Raid happened, and then after that there were the COVERS so it wasn't like anyone was watching the final battle. So at the time maybe all someone so far away heard was of a prodigal young general in the Kiryuin family who was using some kind of new REVOCS tech to conquer Japan, and of her mother - the richest woman in the world who it was said had unnatural powers. And then their clothes ate them and Ryuko saved them and only then did they realize the world had nearly ended. So in that regard it wasn't hard to see how Ryuko, kamui, life-fibers, all of it just sort of came from nowhere to most people in the world, and misinformation and confusion was all they really had.

And so there was a widespread failure to grasp that the kamui were really separate people who just happened to be bonded to their wearers. Nonon had responded with bemusement when a chamberlain had first referred to *her* as a kamui – saying, "Will you and the other kamui be dining in the base tonight?". And Yuda told her a story of a strange ceremony he'd walked in on once where a group of former Christians were performing a sort of eucharist in Senketsu's name, but yet

when they said that they meant Ryuko, interpreted it as a title she held. Thought her blood had healing powers too. Baffling.

Did the masses think that kamui were a sort of aspect of their human, a mind-expanding enlightenment bestowed upon them by Ryuko? She knew that the science team had written plenty of articles describing exactly how kamui worked (and why they deserved to be treated as equals) but it was pretty clear most people weren't reading them.

She'd even seen, just before the party started, a news bulletin about her victory over Rosuketsu where it was claimed the enemy kamui was tempting not Saiban but *her* (or really both of them) to abandon humanity. As if she could abandon her own species! When Uzu asked if they should track down and censor whoever wrote that she... didn't know what to say.

Because to Nonon the real trouble wasn't that she was considered the equal of Artemis or Freya, but that she couldn't control this new phenomenon. She wasn't the one who'd commissioned those statues, they went up with only a nod of tacit approval from her. And for now this worked out just fine, it *really* ensured that her orders were obeyed to the letter. But there had to be unforeseen consequences to this, right? Would this all evolve into something twisted, dark, and decidedly less useful with the passage of years?

*Questions for another day*, Nonon said to herself as she watched from a high stage at her statues feet as the crowds gathered for the medal presentation ceremony. *And yet they keep coming back to me.*

*[I feel a bit wistful,] Saiban commented [I'm going to miss being able to how the people have changed in person. I'm going to miss the jungles and beaches too.]*

Behind her, her Kamui Corps were standing ready, surveying the crowd proudly. Their role would be to give the medals – what good would presenting themselves with more medals do when they were already immortalized 200 feet tall right over there? What further honor could be bestowed on them than knowing that their names would be remembered for all the rest of history? Nonon didn't know much about what would become of them, but she knew that much.

But what would become of those who hadn't yet been so immortalized? What about someone like Mataro? He'd been there since the start, but he wasn't *one of them*, not in the way that mattered to the people. Or someone like Yuda who'd stepped up, hadn't been intimidated, and had proved themselves so useful? Would they be forgotten? Would they be remembered as intermediaries, who served as access for the lowly mortals to the ears of their gods, but who remained just mortals, footnotes? Or would they rise, and be given the same exalted status?

That was something Nonon did get to decide, and she was quite happy to do so.

~~~~~

"I won't bore you all with any preamble about why we're here," Nonon began her speech. The hush of the assembled crowd under her speaker-enhanced voice was breathtaking. The sea of people had filled in to cover the entire park, miles long. "You all know. But if you've been holding your breath, waiting to relax, let me make it official. We won. The reconquest is complete. It's over. WE WON!" She shouted exuberantly, and the audience roared back in return.

Nonon saw a lot of bare, sun-tanned skin and short, loose red-and-white robes on the assembled people. That was another cultural trend she'd seen – following the Kamui's example, clothes were



becoming only necessary when they were, well, necessary. And in a tropical climate, most of what was worn was simply to express their belonging to the reconquest. No matter if you were too fat, too hairy, too old, too gangly, even a lot of the women were topless. She wondered if in the absence of life-fibers the instinct to feel uncomfortable naked was slowly dying out.

She continued, “As I speak, our enemies are running scared from your shores as fast as they can. They’re scared of us, and of you. They’re scared because they know we’ll come after them and if the peoples of other lands band together with us as you have, they won’t stand a chance! *You* are the terror they never expected, they were prepared to fight the kamui alone, but not with an army beside us!” The audience drowned her out once again, a sheer wall of noise. She held her arms up near horizontal, palms facing the sky, basking in it. Screens on every skyscraper showed her graceful figure posing just as majestic as the statues, the serenely triumph smile on that dainty face, the burning in those big pink eyes.

“But, we all know, it’s come at a price.” She motioned to the impenetrable ash clouds above. Grey and bleak, they were pierced by the floodlights around her so the softly drifting “snow” of tiny particles glowed in the rays. “This was more than even we could expect. It’s going to be hard now, I know. But this is what they have planned for us all, until the whole Earth is choked by thousands of volcanoes. Why could they want this? I don’t know,” She finished softly, and then cleared her throat – fully aware how shrill and squeaky her voice could become if she let it – and continued more stridently, “But what I do know is this: it won’t work. We will chase them, we will kill all of them, and we will survive, together. Things may seem dark now, but in that darkness our light will burn even brighter!”

On that cue she, Uzu, Aikuro, and Tsumugu all flipped their various seki-tekko and their kamui transformed. The audience gasped – for many of them who weren’t soldiers this was the first time they had ever seen them transform, and they watched clothes leap over their beautiful, illuminated bodies, writhing up in the flaming shadows of great beasts, lashing themselves down into new, spiny shapes with ferocious, crushing grips. When it was finished Nonon stepped forward to reclaim her microphone and yelled, “And through us, you can believe that **YOU WILL. SEE. THE SUN. AGAIN! SAIBAN KYOCUCHO!**”

And Saiban transformed into his new flight mode and they zoomed off into the air, zipping and ricocheting like a hummingbird. Following right behind came Uzu, propelled by Seijitsu’s beating wings like a bird of prey, gracefully swooping low above the crowds to their delight before climbing up into the sky. Meanwhile the huge jet engines and steel wings of Reiketsu’s new “One Man Air Force” form erupted from nowhere behind Tsumugu, and after a brief moment while they revved up he shot into the air in a straight line, sailing right past the two more nimble fliers and leaving scorch marks on the stage. Music struck up, one of Nonon’s own compositions, orchestral with an electronic twist to its percussion, vast, bassy, and inspiring.

Vanishing into the sky, Nonon took the lead on a pre-correographed route, a perfect circle blasting across the sky almost to the horizon to the west of the city. The others followed suit until they were equally spaced, circling as fast as they could go. As they did, the clouds shifted and turned through the air, becoming disturbed and traveling with them.

Before the city’s astonished eyes, a vast tornado of swirling ash formed above their heads. And, when the moment was right, Aikuro took his position right in center stage, nocked a life-fiber arrow, and Nekketsu stretched into her new transonic arrow mode and fired right into the eye of the tornado. The roaring sound perfectly timed with the climax of the music as a chorus chanted with religiosity.

A tidal wave of light surged through. In a flash, the clouds parted in a circle that stretched many miles, compressing with a huge roll of thunder. The sunset, made even more vibrant and multicolored by all the now-distant clouds, was perfectly framed over the distant hills.

The statues took on a totally different aspect in this light. In the dark, illuminated by floodlights their white surfaces had crackled with brooding, menacing power. But now the sun's rays glistened off them and dyed them pale pink and orange, and all that looming shadow softened into peaceful grandeur.

Again the noise of many tens of thousands of people below was flooring, but not in the same way. This was no coordinate cue for applause. They yelled in shock and exultance, laughed in amazement, *wept* with joy. How great and mighty and good were the kamui? They had brought the *sun* back.

The hole they poked in the impenetrable cloud of ash which Krakatoa pumped in every direction would eventually seal back up. But while it existed, this lifeline back to light, it was visible from space.

# Mataro Triumphant

## Chapter Summary

The Mataro Chapter.

I worked really hard on this one.

But also really late in the night. Please excuse any typos I'll edit as soon as I can.

There's a tiny bit of Japanese in this one. But it's literally just Nonon's signature if you're unsure about it.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2067

~~~~~

“Now, I think you all know by now just how thankful I am to all of you, together. But it’s time to extend some tokens of our gratitude to individuals whose have gone above and beyond for the cause,” Nonon, back on the stage, now transitioned to the medal ceremony part of her speech, “Be they formerly unknown soldiers who fate thrust into glory, or our humble organizers and supply officers who worked tirelessly behind the scenes, there are many deserving of recognition. Like, a lot. But I think we can still give them all equal attention and get back to the festivities quickly, don’t you?” She called to the crowd, and they boomed back in response, patriotic and religious fervor capturing what was usually a fairly boring ceremony.

Mataro was in the front row of a large arc of seating that had been placed close to the stage. Around him various notables sat – local citizen leaders, religious figures, officers and generals, some ambassadors from Japan. A lot of them were getting medals today, they’d already been informed. They watched the stage hungrily.

But nobody told Mataro to expect anything. Now, that didn’t mean he knew for a fact that he wasn’t going to get a medal. He had to weigh Nonon’s love of surprises and feeling that he deserved recognition with the fact that there was a whole bureaucracy under her from whom she’d actually get the medals, who just by protocol would’ve emailed him. Mataro had to doubt that she’d bother sending an order down to avoid informing him, specifically. And considering he was her aide and primary messenger would she really bother using some other channel just for his sake? He’d probably dropped off the forms for this ceremony himself. And so, juggling all these possibilities like his life depended on it, Mataro fidgeted nervously through the hour-long ceremony.

Nonon was indeed going as fast as she could, having all the people receiving a particular commendation line up on stage at once, then calling upon each one and having them step forward.

Still too slow for Mataro. He wasn't really watching until they got to the last set, the ones whose achievements were so specific and so outstanding that they had to be thanked in person.

A villager who lived in the mountains who'd figured out on his own that the blind bomber-drones used sound and – without any commands – looted a truckload of concert speakers and set them up to play REVOCS liturgy from hidden spots in the jungle, confounding all enemy bombing for miles around. An old woman working in the supply department in New Jakarta who stumbled upon a simple trick for repairing DTR kinetic-drive engines using WD-40 and a hair pin that had saved thousands of the things from the scrap heap and let soldiers fix them in the field despite the advanced tech involved. A squad of grizzled vets who, through teamwork and carefully laid traps, had probably taken out enough three-stars to compete with the Kamui. That sort of thing. And then finally Yuda.

At that point Mataro assumed it was over. He watched Nonon describe how helpful the former bodyguard had been, all his exploits in combat, and of course his role helping Ryuko herself in the Australian Engagement Fiasco. He was appropriately weighed down with ribbons and metal baubles, a wry look on his face instead of the stern, somber one expected of the occasion. The cheering for him was loud and continuous – he was unsurprisingly a national hero in a way more intimate than the Kamui could ever be.

Then Nonon said, “Yuda Uwais, your service has excelled so far above and beyond to us in the Kamui Corps in particular that there isn't award for it. So we made one.” From a metal case she produced a gold and velvet sash with a jagged pattern of shafting, crisscrossing lines, obviously evocative of life-fibers. “This is The Thread of Fate,” She intone, drifting up into the air with Saiban's hovering power to bestow it upon him. “It is a symbol of our personal gratitude to you. The highest honor I can bestow. Treasure it, and our friendship, always.”

It was considered in later days that The Thread of Fate was equivalent to Nonon's nod, a sign that you were due to be inducted into the Kamui Corps soon. And while that was effectively what it would be, the myth that she'd been planning this when she first conceived of it was just that, a myth. It seemed hard to think otherwise even at the time though.

That was certainly what Mataro thought as he watched Yuda proudly descend the stairs, and he sighed as he thought, *Alright, maybe it was stupid to get my hopes up. I'm still too young for them to official acknowledge now, I'd be a child soldier! She knows what I've really done. One day that'll be me. One day.*

“And, last but *certainly* not least, MATARO MANKANSHOKU! Get up here!” Nonon's shouting cut through his dejected musing like a lightning bolt. He thought he'd die on the spot, his heart jumped so abruptly. And he could sense her laughing as he jumped, stumbling, to his feet and hustled up. No question, she'd seen the look on his face, and it was exactly what she'd been hoping for.

The light buzz from taste-testing drinks didn't help the surreal, floating feeling Mataro felt as he ascended to the stage. He was hyper aware of everything going on around him except his own body, which moved as though in a dream. The floodlights, the sea of faces lit by the setting sun, the towering presence of the Kamui in full power. Sudden self-consciousness made the blindfold he barely even thought about anymore squeeze so tight. The ponytail of thick, ropery chesnut hair, glistening from the heat and bleached blonde at the tips from months of sun hung heavy on his neck.

He was intensely aware of the thousands of eyes on him, of his stupid giddy smile that was no doubt projected up on a thousand screens right now. This was how they all would remember him.

Oh god, his hands! What was he supposed to do with his hands! Resisting the urge to shove them into his pockets, he felt them tingling as he climbed the stairs. There was Nonon, there was a handmaiden standing there with the case containing *his* Thread of Fate. The highest honor. They were all cheering for him right as, horror of all horrors, he became aware of his own foot again. Getting caught on top step.

Mataro tripped. But he had only a moment for his heart to skip and his brain to instinctively register *Going down!* before another, more powerful instinct kicked in. Most people had the basic to reaction to tripping of holding out their hands, but Mataro was trained in another school of motion. He pushed off with his other foot first, leaning forward as he left the ground. Only once he was horizontal did he actually extend his arms, landing in a handstand before springing off again. It was lucky Nonon seemed to have up-scaled his suit to be a little loose or else it might have ripped (that's what he thought, but this was literally the skinniest men's suit she could find and it was still too loose).

*Roll with it.* Mataro realized simply that his shingantsu – enhanced reflexes had saved him as he tilted along. At this point the question wasn't could he recover, he'd pulled this same move training with Uzu and Satsuki and on the battlefield, just if he had enough space. As it was, he spun in the air to turn his landing into a cartwheel and pushed off with more confidence and – fuck it, why not a flip right before finally landing? Nonon only had to back up a tiny bit for him to stick the landing right in front of her.

“Whoa! Whoa-whoa-whoa!... Nailed it!” Mataro said as he leaned back and forth to recapture his balance, but even he couldn't hear himself over the crowds going wild. The hadn't seen the trip, what they'd seen was this blindfolded teenager who many of them were only become really aware of tonight vault onto the stage without even a running start. After an hour of watching stony-faced soldiers graciously but predictably receiving their commendation, their attention was revived.

Nonon shrugged with a smile as if to say, “*Alright, fair enough.*” And Mataro felt... well, invincible, in the way only a sixteen year old in front of an adoring crowd of uncounted thousands could. Even his mistake turned out better than what was planned, he realized as he beamed at the people. No ordinary person could do that, and Mataro knew then that he was anything but ordinary.

“Mataro Mankanshoku,” Nonon began, “Has been essential to the reconquest since long before today. In fact, he saved it before it even began. It's... not a story I like telling. After our very first battle, we were ambushed. We underestimated the enemy, it's true, and all our supplies were gone. No food, no water, you all know how important it is to stay well stocked. We were stuck in the jungle, waiting for reinforcements. Could we have lasted until they got here? Maybe. But if we had we would have been losing time to the enemy with every day. And we all found out today that time was even more critical than we thought. But Mataro, he saved us. He snuck into a REVOCS camp and stole food and water for us, and saved their prisoners too. With nothing but the clothes on his back and the mud up to his waist, while we watched from the dark. How low of us, I know. But that's Mataro, he's a born survivor. I should've known that from the moment I first met him, camped out in the COVER infested ruins of Honnouji, but he taught me a valuable lesson that day. And I was right to rely on him from then on.”

She went on to describe to the audience how he had become her messenger after she was wounded in her fight with Chimoku, and all his many other deeds great and small besides. It went on for a

while, and every time something notable came up another attendant would come forth with another medal. There must have been twelve of them by the end, Mataro wasn't sure what they were all for. He was amazed she remembered, glowing with pride.

Finally, she finished with, "And I'm sure you've all heard by now about his deeds today, at Krakatoa. Well, on top of everything else, all of that's true. It's remarkable, I know, that so young a man could do so much, and without a Kamui. But think about who his sisters are, is it so surprising anymore?" After a brief pause for cheering she said, "There's no doubt in my mind that Mataro deserves, on top of his other commendations, The Thread of Fate. This recognition is perhaps even overdue."

The handmaiden who was holding the gilded sash stepped forward and draped it over his shoulders. There was something familiar about her – wait a moment, this was the same girl he'd rescued that very night Nonon had mentioned! There was no way he could forget her impression, and now that he'd noticed that it was obvious to him that the rest of the attendants who'd presented him with medals were also prisoners from that same REVOCS camp. He glanced over at Uzu, who responded with a nod and a wry little smile that showed he'd noticed that Mataro had noticed.

It wasn't surprising that Mataro hadn't noticed at first, they all seemed far more healthy and well-fed than they'd been when he rescued them – one of the first things someone using shingantsu would pick up about a person. Especially the girl herself – Mataro had known back then that there was no way they could've talked given the language barrier, but it seemed like such a perfect scenario. And now, well, he spoke pretty good Indonesian.

So as she went to step back he threw caution to the wind and blurted, "Come find me after this, at Nonon's bar." He hoped she understood, but judging by the way she leaned in to catch it, the rise of her eyebrows, and the stifled giggle she most likely did.

"But I don't think that's sufficient. Mataro Mankanshoku has been the unrecognized fifth member of my team. Without him, we wouldn't be here today. And so, I have something very special that's more than just another medal," Nonon snapped him back to attention as she now approached. A lump formed in Mataro's throat the moment he saw what she was carrying.

A sword.

It was in a beautifully decorated deep blue sheath, long and straight with a hand-and-a-half handle. The same handle Nonon offered up to him, and his hands shook as he reached for it.

Forget about the girl. That was nice, but this? This was *everything*.

Nonon kept a hold on the sheath as he drew it, revealing it to the world. His sword. The blue-black hardened life-fiber blade glinted in the sun. He could feel immediately the perfection of the weight and balance, but that was no surprise. What was surprising was the little lightning bolt pattern across the crossguard and threading down the sides of the blade. Mataro had to laugh – was that an homage to his old Honnou-town nickname "Lightspeed Mataro"? Obviously Nonon and Shiro (Who had no doubt made the sword) had put great attention into tailoring it just for him.

The overall design was perfectly fitting to him too. A bit shorter than a katana and straight, his sword was a ninjato – known in pop-culture as the swords used by ninjas though in truth a relatively modern design. Still, what better choice for someone who'd made their rep as the resident infiltration expert? And it was close enough to the katanas and shinai he'd trained with that it felt instantly natural in his hands. The hand-and-a-half grip was great too for someone with a nimble,

acrobatic close quarters fighting style – it was something he had specifically complained about to Uzu while training with two-handed katanas.

There were tears beading under Mataro's blindfold as – at a nonverbal prompt from a proud Nonon - he held his sword high above his head for the crowds to see. That was when he noticed the little tag hanging down from the pommel. He ran a finger along it to read it.

### *I.O.U part 2 . ~ 蛇崩乃音*

Everything was elation and bliss. It was now beyond all doubt, he would be getting a Kamui. He held the proof in his hands.

~ ~ ~

“Uh, Lord Mankanshoku?” A woman's voice called in Japanese across the bar as Mataro another painkiller for Nonon. He smiled when he saw the handmaiden from earlier, the very same girl he'd first pulled from her chain in a REVOCS camp somewhere in the jungles of Sulawesi. At the time, details such as what she actually looked like paled in comparison to the simple fact that she needed help.

But now, well, he sure wasn't complaining. Tall and slender, with beautifully clear and tanned skin and a broad, dimpling smile. Considering she'd been bruised and near emaciated last time he saw her, the transformation was shocking. The sort of girl that in high school he would've assumed well out of his league. And she was here at his request, and everyone around knew it.

*I always used to say I was gonna be a baller. I guess it happened.*

“Yo! Awesome, you found me!” He hurried over, answering her in Indonesian, determined to be the best, coolest host he could be. “How'dya like the party?”

“Oh, you can speak in Japanese!” She answered, smiling a little nervously as she tried to be heard over the pounding club music. “I learned to speak it!” As she leaned in to be heard it was hard not to notice the ruby-red scissor blade talisman she was wearing around her neck, especially considering that she'd swapped her formal dress for a simple red skirt and a red and white striped bikini top. The eye, especially a teenage boy's eye, was drawn to it.

“Really? Oh, that's a relief. So, do you want anything to drink, uh... hold on, what your name?”

“It's Diah! Yeah, I learned to speak it so that you -”

“- Diah? Great, so do you want a drink, I can make you just about anything,” Mataro said, not meaning to cut her off but it was terribly, overwhelmingly loud and crowded with the party in full swing. She didn't mind though – if it was overwhelming for him it was doubly so for Diah in her starstruck state.

“Really? Well, but I'm just seventeen!”

Laughing to himself as he decided not to tell her he was even younger, he said, “You like sweet drinks? I'll start you with something not-too-strong, the night's still young!”

At this point the crowd parted for Nonon and Uzu to swagger their way to the bar. “We ready?” Nonon barked to Mataro, her cheeks rosy with inebriation.

“Coming up!” He passed Nonon her glass, and then offered Uzu a cherry red drink. “And for you – not telling you what’s in it!” He said mischievously.

“Oohhhh boy here we go!” Uzu replied, and he and Nonon clinked their glasses together and downed them in a single, mighty pull as Diah watched with an open mouth. Mataro nodded appreciatively, glancing at Diah to say, “*And now you see what they’re like up close.*”

Uzu gasped soundlessly as his face immediately went far redder than Nonon’s, “Oh my *GOD!* What did you put in this, jalapeño juice?” Nonon cackled at his discomfort.

“You got it! Whadya think?”

“Keep the mystery drinks coming, is what I think,” He said, and Mataro made a finger gun at him in response.

“Ohohoho,” Nonon’s laughter trailed off eventually. “Well, if you’re done being so *dramatic*. Monkey! Dance with me!” She demanded dramatically, holding out an elegant hand and tilting her head back even more dramatically.

“C’mon, I told you I don’t know how to do couple dances.”

“Ugh! And we both know you’ll pick it up in half a second! But if you’re so uncertain, I can lead.”

“Well, no, you’re not doing that,” Uzu took the challenge and her hand and the crowds again parted to pave a way to the dance floor.

And Mataro passed a drink to Diah (a very weak banana daiquiri – he had no interest in being accused of getting her too drunk for his own purposes) and then vaulted clean over the bar counter, clearing the empty glasses neatly even though his sash and new sword weighed him down. He gave Diah a friendly elbow and said, “This should be fun!” before following Nonon and Uzu to the dance floor.

~~~~~

The evening went by in a blur.

To nobody’s surprise, Nonon and Uzu stole the show, improvising dance moves together as easily as they did combo attacks in battle. Then, to everyone but Aikuro’s surprise, a little later Tsumugu took to the floor with an impressive breakdance. When Mataro remarked that he would never have guessed Tsumugu was capable of that Aikuro laughed and said, “Well you see it’s not a social activity, it’s something you practice, so naturally he’d love it.”

After that things broke down into more general club dance and Mataro and Diah found themselves on the floor. Apparently former tourist nightclubs in New Jakarta were essential to helping everyone unwind after slaving away for the reconquest all day, because plenty more people than the kamui wearers had come prepared.

Including Diah – maybe she’d been a country girl before the invasion but at some point Mataro learned she’d reunited with her family and made her way to New Jakarta, where she’d found a job in a supply depot. It seemed she’d adapted to it quite well. And that she was under the (not entirely inaccurate) impression that she owed it all to Mataro. And felt certain there was something she could do to repay him.



Being his date for the party was a good start. There was plenty more to do, the night really was still young. Outside the bar an impromptu soccer game started up, which Uzu forbid Mataro from joining (“It would take the fun out of it for everyone else”). But he didn’t forbid him from betting on it, which Mataro did and did not win as consistently as he would’ve liked.

After that he and Diah wandered into the park, where thousands of lanterns and light illuminated tents from which the aroma of every food imaginable flowed and the rank and file soldiers stood around long bars constructed from parts of enemy planes and ships and got blasted from huge barrels of alcohol. She showed him around for a bit, but the place was a maze and eventually they quit to return to Nonon’s bar. It was also tough to get much out of it when everyone kept stopping what they were doing to bow or salute the moment they saw him – a thoroughly surreal experience. Being begged to bless rosaries with a scissor blade talisman on them wasn’t really what he’d expected.

Back at the bar there was yet more to be done. More dancing, more drinks. People had broken out the playing cards, and of course Mataro jumped into the mix (and of course he cheated plenty). Nonon was in no position to stop him, she was roaring drunk, singing along to her own music. Nonon, *singing*. And then to wrap things up they sat with Aikuro and his date and Tsumugu and Aoi and just shot the shit. Mataro couldn’t help but feel so much more mature and adult than ever before welcomed into their company.

*It’s this sword. The sword is proof I’m worth it. That might seem stupid to some people, but not us!*

How long all that took, Mataro had no idea. It all ran together, not only because he’d started pouring drinks for himself but because it all felt so natural. He could do no wrong. It didn’t even feel weird walking around with this essentially strange girl on his arm.

It was only when he was alone in the elevator with her, on the way up to his room, that an appropriate amount of nerves caught up with him.

Oh, sure, he’d spent a lot of his adolescence catcalling and ogling women, but that something utterly different. When you’re so clearly just a sniveling middle schooler that sort of abuse was born of the knowledge that it wasn’t like you’d ever be worth the time to them – it was mostly crude humor for your equally sniveling buddies. And sure he’d had a “girlfriend” in high school, but it wasn’t like they’d ever gone further than a chaste kiss, that was also just mostly a social thing. But if you actually can get the girl’s attention, hell, if she looks thrilled that you invited her back to her suite, all that goes right out the window. You had to be a gentleman, you had to treat her right.

And Mataro had no clue how to do that.

Fortunately, the moment they got into his suite the answer occurred to him: “You know, I think my weed stash is around here somewhere. Haven’t had the time for it lately. You smoke?”

And so he was feeling somewhat calmer as they settled on the balcony. Diah settled in next to him on the big lounge chair, and they spent a while chilling out, talking about funny things from their shared experiences of the reconquest as they finished off the last of the weed he’d brought with him to Indonesia. The sun had long since set and given the lights of the city there weren’t many stars visible through the hole in the sky, just a warm grey-purple haze. The breeze was starting to cool.

*This is nice* , Mataro thought as he threaded his arms around her belly, *We can stay like this for however long. And then, whatever happens after happens, and that’s fine. I guess Ryuko was wrong*

*then. I'm not **that** desperate to swap spit with chicks.* He chuckled to himself at that.

"Hmm? What so funny?" Diah asked.

"Huh? Oh, I was just thinking about something Ryuko said to me once."

"R-really? Is she funny in person?"

"Oh, totally! She's got this kinda snarky deadpan style to her – always kinda plays off my blood sister, Mako, you know."

"Yeah, I know who she is."

"Well it's like, Mako's always all-in on everything, and Ryuko will act like she's not impressed and make some snide remarks, but eventually she'll cave. It's a nice dynamic. And you should see her and Nonon go at it!"

"Ah, I see! And, uh, they say she's intimidating in real life, but I don't think that's true, right?"

"Well... you piss her off – which I have done plenty – and sure, but most of the time nah. I mean, I see where it comes from, people thinking that, but I dunno."

He must have seemed like he was hesitating to answer a little because she said, "I'm sorry, I'm sure you don't want to be talking about her now."

"Huh? No it's fine, she's awesome, really."

"I mean, to you, she's just your sister, I get it," Diah went on, "But to us she's... well, what *isn't* she? It sounds kinda weird to say it, but is she really a god or something?"

"Oof, big question," Mataro blew out a breathe and then deviated from the agreed upon Kamui Corps stance a little bit in light of the scissor blade talisman she was wearing. "I know she's not technically 'human', and I'm pretty sure she's immortal. But whatever that makes people call her I don't care, she's just Ryuko, I knew her even before she found out about life-fibers. It's a bit crazy to me how many people there are worshiping her, it's like you said she's my sister, just a person. I think there's something nice to it though. It's cool that she's like the whole world's now – all of them are."

"And you too."

"Oh, I dunno about that," Mataro said humbly.

"Hey, y'know I never got a chance to tell you why I learned Japanese."

"You're doing great, by the way. But why did you?"

"Well, so I could thank you!"

"Wha-really?"

"Sure," Diah said like it was the most natural thing in the world, "You saved my life, what else was supposed to do! I never thought I'd get the chance, I wasn't even sure it was really you. But then Lord Sanageyama tracked me down and I knew I had to do it."

“Well, I uh, that’s very sweet of you,” Mataro stammered, suddenly aware of the uptick of intensity in her voice. “I really appreciate it. And the rest of the night has been great too.”

“Mmm. Hey, can I ask another question about you?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“What’s up with the blindfold? I mean, you do take it off, don’t you? I mean, you can see, right?” She finished a little uncertainly – it wasn’t out of the question to her that he really was blind.

“Well, what have you heard?”

Diah took a moment to think, “What I’ve heard... I’ve heard that Lord Sanageyama had one just like it, and it gave him a power called, uh, shingantsu? They say he could see in 360 degrees, every tiny little detail.”

“That’s pretty close. But the thing is, the blindfold itself doesn’t do anything special. It’s to help you train your senses. Shingantsu is more like meditation, anyone can do it if they work at it, and you don’t lose it if you take the blindfold off,” Mataro explained.

“So you *can* take it off!”

“Yeah – but also no. Satsuki would kill me if I did!” But the moment he said it, doubts entered his mind. He’d mastered shingantsu, the stated purpose of the blindfold, and Nonon had all but assured him he’d be getting a Kamui. Sure, she’d said that if he took it off even once that was proof that he’d given up, but wasn’t that just her cruel way of trying to force him to back down? Surely she knew by now it hadn’t worked.

And besides, it wasn’t like she was here.

His heart jumped as Diah sat up, turned over under she was looking right at him, practically on top of him. “But I did really want to see your eyes though,” She pouted.

How the hell was he supposed to say no to that. Still, he protested a little more, “It is really important to my training though.”

“But just this once? I think I’ve got something you’ll want to see. I don’t get it, what’s the harm?”

Twist his arm. Muttering, “Oh, alright, alright,” he did the one thing he had, despite every possible temptation, resisted doing for years. He tucked his thumbs under the ratty black fabric of his blindfold and gently, oh so gently, lifted it off his face.

Diah was staring him right in the eyes, not six inches from his face. He squinted against the light, and she smiled wide. Every detail popped, practically every pore on her face, and it was all so *vivid*, so bright and so – wow, wow she was close. This was not what he remembered vision as being like. Was it the shingantsu enhancing his sight?

Or had he never really appreciated his eyes before?

He didn’t waste much time thinking about it and, rather than spoiling the moment, kissed her. When they parted she was giggling.

“What?” He smiled back.

“Oh it’s nothing, nothing. Just – the tan line!” She almost burst out laughing as Mataro processed what his face must’ve looked like and he slapped a hand to his forehead.

“Oh my god! I didn’t think of that! I have reverse-raccoon eyes!” He exclaimed, also bursting into laughter.

“But you do have cute eyes though,” Diah noted as she calmed down.

“Thanks. You have a nice... uh... oh, you know,” He cut himself off to kiss her again.

It was quite a while they stayed there like that, until eventually, at her prompting, Mataro nervously lifted her up and inside. Towards his bedroom, oh god.

Once again, his nerves started picking up. Was this really what was going on now?

But before they had a chance to affect him much, Diah said, “Hey, before we – uh, do anything else, you mind if I go into the bathroom and freshen up?” Maybe Mataro should’ve guessed that she felt just as nervous – for someone so famous, she couldn’t disappoint. But nothing like that occurred to him, he was just relieved to have a second to collect his thoughts.

“Huh? Oh, sure,” He set her down, and as he did she noticed the troubled look on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, nothing, nothing really.”

She suddenly put the pieces together, “This isn’t your first time, is it?”

“... Yeah...” He sighed simply.

“But don’t worry, it’s only my third. You gotta have a first time sometime.”

She seemed so nonchalant about it, it was easy to forget she was also a teenager just figuring this stuff out. “You’re sure it’s not a problem?”

“Are you kidding?” She giggled, then added as though talking to herself, “I’m going to be the prince’s first, wow!”

Record scratch in Mataro’s head, “Wait, hold on, did you just say... prince?”

“You haven’t heard?” Again, a nonchalant response, “They’re gonna make Ryuko queen, that’s what all the top generals have planned. You’re going to be a prince!”

None of that made any sense. But no wonder she was curious about Ryuko. Mataro said, “I think I would’ve heard about something like that.”

She shrugged, “That’s what my priestess says. She says that making Ryuko queen is like a... compromise between becoming part of Japan and staying free. There’s a word for it, I don’t know but...”

“You know what? That’s big news you just dropped on me. Let’s just not worry about that til morning, alright?”

With Diah in the bathroom redoing her makeup and whatnot, Mataro took the long overdue chance to finally look at himself in the mirror. And yeah, the tan line was really, really bad. But other than that.

“Holy shit. That’s really me, huh?” Mataro mumbled, examining a young man who could’ve been a total stranger, a distant relative to the boy he’d been when he first put on his blindfold. Thin maybe, but strong and no longer a half-grown dwarf, with calloused fingers and smooth skin. He still had the wide, amber-brown eyes of a Mankanshoku, and that mouth that was a bit too big, but any excess flab on his jawline had been whittled to nothing. While he hadn’t been looking, his training had turned him into someone who could stand beside the Honnouji Elites, the Kamui Corps, and not look out of place. And it was maybe the most surreal thing in an entirely surreal night (it did not help that by this point he was not quite high-as-a-kite but in the process of getting there).

He appraised his situation, collected his thoughts as he’d been meaning to. *Well, I guess this is it, this is what I do now. Am I ready for this?* And though a part of him (a big part) said *Fuck yes, this rules*, he couldn’t help but weigh his options.

The way he saw it, this was the Aikuro method he was probably employing here. Avoid long term, committed relationships. He suddenly understood why Aikuro went through so many girlfriends and one-night-stands – because even with a very nice girl like Diah there would be a degree to which your fame influenced them. And how could you get close to someone, really close, if they weren’t really with you for *you* but for who you were? It made perfect sense, and Mataro knew that was alright with him for the foreseeable future. But for the rest of his life?

The Tsumugu method would be to be with someone who knew you from before you were famous, so you could be sure that wasn’t the case. And that just wasn’t an option for him.

And what about the Nonon and Uzu option? Could he wind up with someone of about equal notoriety one day? There was no guarantee of that.

And so he felt weirdly trapped. Not like tonight wasn’t great, but knowing now that he would be getting a kamui one day, that meant he had to figure out how to live like a member of the Kamui Corps. And long term, it didn’t look like there were too many ways to do that.

“I need some fresh air,” He said absently to himself, and re-positioned his blindfold before stepping out into the hall.

But before he did even that though, he grabbed a pen he kept on his nightstand and hastily scrawled “*Ryuko=Queen?*” on his arm. Just in case he forgot.

~~~~~

The second to highest floor of the skyscraper that the reconquest claimed as their base had six lavish suites, three on each side of the main hall. Aikuro’s, Tsumugu’s, Yuda’s, Mataro’s, one they had converted into a temporary gym, and a spare which Uzu and Nonon were using tonight. At each end were two wide terraced balconies with fountains and gardens. This was where Mataro went for his fresh air, and to his surprise Uzu was already there, crouched perfectly balanced on the glass railing, wearing a bathrobe. He seemed to be in deep thought

“Hey man, how’s it going?” Uzu asked, roused, as Mataro walked over.

“Pretty good, pretty good. You getting some fresh air too, huh?”

“I’m taking a goddamn break is what I’m doing! This shit’s more exhausting than the battle, I tell you. Nonon, she – nevermind, remind me to tell you when you’re older.”

“I’m feeling like I’m old enough now. Actually, can I ask you a question?”

“Do you have that girl from the ceremony in there?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it about that?”

“Yeah,” Mataro answered, shrugging.

“Huh,” Uzu contemplatively took that in, “Well, I wish I could help you. First time’s always a little awkward. Just don’t think about it too hard, you’ll be fine.”

“Don’t think about it too hard?”

“I’m not exactly about to give you a step by step explanation of fucking, you know. Looking on the bright side though, this is about as opportune a first time as you can get. I mean, it’s not like you’ll see this girl any time soon, right?”

“I suppose not, no.”

“So who really cares?” Uzu said confidently, “Y’know it’s funny, mine was in a similar situation, on a diplomatic trip not long after the who graduation-defcon-honnouji sinking thing. It’s not a bad deal.”

“Oh. Well that’s good to hear, I guess. Hey, but did you -”

Uzu’s phone buzzed with a text message. Mataro could see him looking at it, reading, then looking at a photo. His face went quite strikingly blank and he stepped off the railing. “Alright. I gotta go.”

“Uh... what just happened?”

“Well A: In my absence, Nonon has taken the opportunity to drink more, and B: I’m really glad shingantsu doesn’t work on screens right now. See ya.”

“Fair enough man, fair enough,” Mataro turned to go.

“Hey one last thing,” Uzu called.”

“Yeah?”

He threw something small at Mataro. A condom.

“Don’t think about it too hard, but don’t be stupid, alright?”

Mataro made it back to his suite just as Diah was ready, and helped himself to one more shot from a bottle of liquor he’d snuck up. Memories after that point were blurry, but very good.

~~~~~

The next morning, Mataro awoke still feeling half drunk and with the stale back-wash of his high just washing away. And a hole in his stomach that he wasn't sure was from needing to vomit or plain old hunger. Diah didn't look much better either, no surprise, she'd almost gone drink for drink with him for a while (Mataro had *thought* they were pacing themselves well). It took him a bit of coaxing to convince her that he wasn't kicking her out, but that he was going to go on a walk himself.

Down in the bar, he found a bleary looking Nonon and Uzu. Nominally, they were overseeing the cleanup operations, but Nonon was just hunched over the bar, the circles under her eyes nearly black. She only groaned a little in greeting. Uzu, meanwhile, was cooking eggs on the bar's stovetop (yes, this bar had a stove. It really did have just about everything before it had been utterly trashed the night before).

"Well well, good afternoon Mataro!" Uzu greeted him as cheerily as he could. "Want some eggs?"

"No don't..." Nonon murmured, "... the eggs are for us..."

"Uh..."

"Saiban's about the only thing keeping her upright right now," Uzu explained.

"Ah," Now was not the time to ask what Nonon and alcohol had done to her last night. It affects people in weird ways, apparently her body had decided that it needed nutrients only fried eggs could provide in order to restore itself. But there was something else he was supposed to ask her, wasn't there? Something... Oh yeah, on his arm. "Hey, Nonon, you awake?"

"Yeah, I'm *awake*, dumbass. What. Or shut up. I don't care."

"Well I just... Diah mentioned something to me, something you should know about." He hopped up onto the barstool next to her and whispered, "They're gonna come to you and ask to make Ryuko queen. That's how they want to solve the future of the country."

Nonon's back straightened up, and she chuckled morosely. "Oh, I should've seen something like that coming. So that's the solution they think will fix things. Heh...hehe... thanks kid, that's the most useful thing you've done for me since..."

She didn't finish that thought because Uzu finished her food and set the plate in front of her. Mataro had never seen even Mako demolish fried eggs like that.

## Chapter End Notes

This is going to be a pretty detailed run-through of my thought process. You don't have to read it if that's not something you want.

So Mataro's been a really tough one to deal with. He's a comic relief character who's main joke is fairly crude, but for a fic that carries for years on he's obviously going to be an important character. The thing is, there's really not a lot to go off of to sculpt his personality, like with Rei I've had to try and do a lot of that myself (Rei will be back in the story in a bit, if you were wondering). The trouble is, what I needed to do with him and what it is that he wants and is

about are both pretty simple. I needed to make him be the young-blood who steps up to take his place with the established main characters. And that's what he wanted to do.

My initial plan was to do a "Simon and Kaneda thing" a la Gurren Lagann. You can see that in the first couple chapters. Have his development mostly be about his idolization of Ryuko and have him overcoming that to stand on his own. Obviously Ryuko wouldn't be dead but out of the fight, first because of the whole Ragyo thing and then because of \*SPOILER REASONS\*. But that didn't work because while Simon was jealous of some aspects of Kaneda (mostly that he got to smooch Yoko) he ultimately felt that his place was at Kaneda's side, not upstaging him. That's why Kaneda's death was so earth-shattering, because to Simon there was no replacing him. Whereas for Mataro he would have loved to be awesome like all the main characters - he was gonna be a baller, he said it himself. A little of this still made it into the final version, he obviously still adores Ryuko, but it's not the main thing going on with him.

So I then conceived of having it be mostly between him and Satsuki, with Satsuki controlling Mataro's training and being overly harsh. The point was to essentially have her repeating the same mistakes that were made in her training. The thing was that I didn't have any real idea how to wrap it up without compromising some aspects of Mataro's personality as someone who's fun loving, mischievous, and aspires to a rock-and-roll-type lifestyle a bit. I didn't see it being worth molding him into a mini-Satsuki just to have him like rebel against that and have her realize. Plus, considering that Satsuki's "screen time" had to be used on other things it didn't work. Doubly, this would never give him the opportunity to go out and have adventures and moments showing his growth as a potentially heroic character. You would just be told that his training was progressing in one way or another, and since I'm going out on a limb trying to make him a heroic character already that's not gonna work.

But then it occurred to me that for the short period of time they share the screen Nonon and Mataro have kind of an interesting dynamic. She's very judgemental and would naturally be super dismissive of him, why not put him in a situation to actually prove her wrong? Plus, who among the cast shares some personality with Mataro and would be most likely to take him in as a sort of older brother figure? Uzu. Which even more makes putting him in Nonon's sphere of influence make sense. And when I had the idea to separate Nonon - to create a tropical background for battles and to set up the threat premise of the "ring of fire" with a very well known destructive volcano, and to give her the time to do some development out from under Satsuki and Ryuko's shadow - I decided that the way to make this happen was to send him with her. And you see how this has worked out.

I'm quite happy with it personally. I felt like I needed to persuade readers to take Mataro seriously, and I don't know if I did that, but I think out of all the ideas I worked through I ended up with the best one to at least try.



# Something about time, distance, and wounds

## Chapter Notes

ATTENTION: There may be a slightly longer delay before the next chapter than I was even expecting because my laptop up and died on me. Hopefully it doesn't take too long for them to fix but we shall see. Could be anything from a 5 minute fix to I need to order a new one for all I know.

And of course this fic should be the least of my worries because that hard drive has a bunch of shit I need for work on it, but my first thought nevertheless was "ah crap how am I gonna write my fanfiction?"

(And no, I didn't lose any content. My outline is in a notebook and I hadn't started typing the next chapter yet. And this is exactly why my outline is in a notebook)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

May 2067

~~~~~

Ryuko had a plan for when Nonon got back to Japan. Just avoid her as much as possible. Eventually she'd cool down, and then they could try to work things out. But for now after the battle Nonon had the advantage. Considering that – on top of everything with Satsuki – Ryuko had disobeyed her direct orders, so Nonon had an overwhelming advantage and wouldn't hesitate to beat her over the head with how she'd fucked up. Didn't matter if it was the right decision. She *hated* Ryuko now, they weren't begrudging friends who sniped at each other anymore. She made Nonon sick.

So of course the very day she arrived Ryuko found herself alone and face-to-face with Nonon. They were sitting at the broad black table in the secret war council room beneath the research complex, Ryuko arms stiff, hands on her knees, Nonon crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair with a smug smile. Ryuko could feel from Saiban's aura that whatever she had planned, they were a united front. Not that she expected anything else, if a girl couldn't rely on her kamui to always take her side who did she have? But it also meant he wasn't likely to reign her in if she decided to really give Ryuko hell.

Plus, she'd heard through the grapevine (from Mako and thus from Ira) that she wasn't thrilled to be back. So no matter what Nonon was already in a bad mood, and Ryuko had to just sit there and take it.

No, she wasn't scared, shut up!

"I should've know this was a trap," Ryuko muttered.

"Oh, sure, a vague message from Houka same day I got back, maybe you should've. But whatever, you're here now," Nonon said.

After a pause to steel herself, thinking *I can't mess this up, for Satsuki's sake I'll grovel if it might fix things between us*, Ryuko said, "I can explain."

"Oho! This should be good," Nonon chuckled.

Ryuko all but flinched, "Now look, I know I disobeyed your orders. Tensions were running high and -"

"- Oh, *that's* what you wanted to explain. No need. I know all about that."

"Wha – you do? What's that supposed to mean?"

"The connection – empowerment – it works both ways, dumbass!" The way they'd always talked to each other, but Ryuko didn't feel at all inclined to shoot back. "Let's see, the way I remember it you assumed that I would tell you to shut down the empowerment the moment I could, so you had a limited time to kill Rosuketsu. And you *basically* decided that you'd take over my body to get it done."

"Well, not *take over*-" Ryuko, despite herself, began to protest.

"-Please, we both know I was barely there. Anyway, you thought my pride would get the best of me, but when it obviously didn't even though you could feel how much I hated it you realized that *I* was willing to go further than you for the win. That *you* were the one with the ego that made her think only she with her big bad hybrid powers could get the job done. That *you* were the one who wouldn't cooperate with *me*. And so you decided to do the right thing and let me take care of it."

"I..." Ryuko began. *No, I can't tell her. There was no other version of events where I didn't drop the connection with her, because I overwrote it.* There was no other version where Nonon and Ryuko never managed to sync up their fighting instincts and so never killed Rosuketsu. Where the guys didn't see Nonon fighting unempowered and so never got the competitive spirit to evolve their new forms. Where because of that they couldn't stop the hybrid whale and the REVOCS boarding parties from sinking most of the fleet. Where the volcano still erupted anyway. And where when it was over Nonon resigned her post as captain of the Kamui Corps, crushed and sure that no matter what she tried Ryuko would always upstage her. Ryuko had gone back, changed one simple action on her own part, and erased that first outcome from existence. Ryuko hadn't told anyone but Satsuki (and obviously Senketsu) about that.

No amount of gloating from Nonon would convince her she had made the wrong choice. *And besides, she's not wrong*. So Ryuko said, "Yeah, yeah that's basically it. So wait, you're *not* mad at me?"

Nonon burst out laughing in a tone that swiftly transitioned from amused to malicious, "Oh my god you really are stupid! What do you think's going on here, I called you in to tell you that just because you did one right thing I'm gonna forget that you're fucking Satsuki? Just cuz I like watching you squirm?" She eventually managed to contain herself and straightened up. "Alright, well I do, but still. I'm not mad at you *for that*. That's the one time I can think of when you did the right thing without being told. And no, I don't count saving the world, because in your position anyone would have done the same," Ryuko opened her mouth to protest – nobody had ever said something like that to her – but Nonon finished with "You've said as much yourself."

"Look, I'm sorry, alright? Just tell me what I can do to chill you out, and I'll do it."

“Oh, sure you’re sorry. You’re sorry you got *caught!* And I’m perfectly ‘chilled out’, I’ll have you know. Now, anyway. It’s nice knowing we both know... Oh c’mon, ask me what?”

“If that’s what you want,” Ryuko sighed, “Know what?”

“That I’m better than you,” Nonon grinned as Ryuko momentarily clouded over with rage. *I know she’s trying to provoke me, I can’t let her!* “I’m a better leader, I’m a better duelist, a better public figure, hell, I think I’m a better *person* than you.” Ryuko couldn’t tell if Nonon was just trying to piss her off or if she actually felt like that was something she had to prove. *Does she really have such a rivalry with me? I always thought it was just for fun. I didn’t mean to make her feel less than me, did I?* If she’d talked to Satsuki, she might’ve known that intentionally or not Ryuko needed at insecurities that had prickled at Nonon since long before. As it was she stayed silent and hung her head as Nonon went on, “It’s fine, you don’t need to say it, we both know. I’ve just been waiting for this for months. You incestuous, narcissistic, idiotic, dropout-”

“-How did you know about-” Ryuko started, because since the Australian Engagement Fiasco Ryuko was taking a break from college to be Satsuki’s bodyguard full-time (Satsuki was actually waiting upstairs for her at that very moment). But Nonon wasn’t done.

“Greasy-haired, lazy, gormless, vulgar, immature, stoner, drunkard, cranky-”

“-Cranky!-”

“-ratty-looking, self-indulgent, two-timing, sex-obsessed-”

“That is so unf-”

“Wait, I’m not done!” At this point Ryuko saw from her phone that Nonon was reading off a list of insults, no doubt carefully compiled over months and edited for maximum punch and minimum redundancy. “Ahem. Only-good-at-fashion-because-you-absorbed-Ragyo,” (That one really stung), “despite-that-can’t-dress-yourself,” (That one too), “And shitty taste in music-”

“I listen to *your* music, you asshole!” Ryuko finally managed to get through, standing up and yelling with her hands on the table.

Nonon froze. “No you don’t. You hate classical music.”

“No, not that. Your pop-rock and electronic stuff. Here, look,” She unlocked her phone and tossed it to Nonon, who – taken totally off guard – complied and opened up the music app.

Ryuko’s playlists had very utilitarian names. “Main”, “Workout” (a bit of a misnomer considering she didn’t need to exercise to maintain her physique anymore), “Studying”, “Mako” and “Sats”. Nonon’s expression was utterly confounded as she opened the “Main” playlist and found, sure enough, that almost a full three-quarters of it was hers. Artist name *Regalia*, track names just simple numbers. “Workout” was even more of those, just upbeat dance tracks, carefully curated. Like, the whole playlist was music she’d written. And “Studying”, maybe even more surprising, had some of Nonon’s classical compositions on it in addition to a bunch of her instrumentals. “Mako” was the only one with less *Regalia* in it, presumably because that was music Mako liked, to be listened to with her. Nonon recognized popular pop-singers and some light and cheery acoustic and ukulele songs. She didn’t open the one named “Sats”. She didn’t want to know, and she’d seen enough.

“You... like my music?” She asked.

“I mean, is it that surprising? You’re an amazing composer,” Ryuko said, completely honestly. Nonon’s face went even blanker, and even a little red from consternation, as she realized Ryuko knew enough to use the term composer which she preferred over musician or songwriter. To fill the silence Ryuko rambled on “I really like your guitar style, I mean it’s just... there’s no-one else that’s got that sort of... I dunno, airy feel? I even like how you don’t put titles on your songs. It makes it feel more artsy, like you’re listening in on your jam session.”

“Wha – oh you motherfucker!”

“Sisterfucker,” Ryuko couldn’t resist slipping it in, Nonon’s vitriol seemed to have died down.

“Do you know that Satsuki said the same exact thing? About the titles! Well, she had a different reason, but still.”

“Wait, let me guess. She said she gets distracted thinking about the meaning of title and forgets to enjoy the music, didn’t she?”

Again Nonon’s face went even redder, because that was exactly right, “Alright, what’s your game here?”

“Nothing, I swear!” Ryuko yelled back defensively, then continued more softly, “I just think I’ve got pretty good taste in music and you’d want to know.”

“When were you planning on telling me this? Ever?”

“I dunno, okay?”

“And for how long?”

“Oh, like, a while?” Ryuko answered hesitantly.

“*Years!*” Nonon screeched in realization. She didn’t even look angry anymore, just upset. Hurt, even.

“Gosh, has it really been years?”

“Why! Why would you do something like that? If you’d told me-”

Ryuko shot back, “Oh, whatever. I thought I was dead to you, why’s it matter so much?”

“It’s the principle of it! We *were* friends! I – weren’t we?” Nonon cut herself off to ask.

“Well,” Ryuko started, but didn’t go on. She’d always considered Nonon her friend, even if she wasn’t quite sure she’d felt the same way. *But she didn’t know that*. And now Ryuko saw clearly why she’d never known. It was her own fault, there was no rational reason, she just... didn’t tell her. “I don’t really know why I didn’t tell you. I... now I’m thinking about it, and I know it’s stupid, I always thought if you knew, you’d make fun of me for it.”

“Why would I do that?” Nonon huffed, but she was a little uncertain now because honestly she probably would’ve.

“Or maybe that if you knew you’d stop making the type I like.”

“Wha – what kind of sick ego-trip are you living in?” Nonon exclaimed.

“I don’t know, okay?” Ryuko was sitting with her hands over her face now. She’d expected to have to deal with Nonon’s berating, but not with knowing for certain that she was *right*. No, it wasn’t like if she’d told her, if they’d bonded over her music, Nonon would’ve accepted her relationship with Satsuki. If anything she’d have felt even more betrayed. But even when Ryuko had thought she was being Nonon’s friend she’d hurt her without even meaning to. She felt way more sorry about this than she did for disobeying Nonon’s order, and a hell of a lot more than she did for Satsuki. “I should have told you, I didn’t know how much it meant to you.”

“How could you *not* know?”

“Rrrgh, just stop already! *Please* !”

And Ryuko must’ve sounded plenty fraught, because Nonon did stop. For a while they both sat their silently, mulling in their respective thoughts. Finally Nonon said, “Well, congratulations, mission accomplished. I don’t even feel like giving you hell anymore.”

“Well, mission accomplished, you did.”

The next time Nonon broke the silence it was to say, “You never did answer my question. Were we friends?”

Ryuko didn’t answer right away, but eventually, “Yeah. I think so.”

“Remember when Saiban asked you to go to the art museum with him? You wanted to bring Rei, but she was busy?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Ryuko nodded, not looking directly at Nonon. Fortunately, Nonon wasn’t looking at her either

“Were you just putting up with me?”

“No, of course not. That was really fun.”

“Oh. It’s fucked up what you did to Rei though,” Nonon said calmly – it wasn’t an accusation or a judgement, just a statement of fact.

A Ryuko matter-of-factly agreed, “Yeah. I don’t know why I ever thought she’d come back. Or, she did that once, but it was all fucked up too.”

“I didn’t hear about that. What happened then?”

Ryuko sat up, “You’d better not-”

“- I’m her commanding officer, her team leader. And also her friend. I just want to know.”

“Well, we just hooked up twice, and never talked about it. It was weird. For the record, she was the one who started it, but I should never have agreed to that, I felt awful the moment I did.”

Nonon sounded skeptical of that last part though when she said, “For double two-timing? Yeah, you probably should’ve.”

“Hey, I’m being totally honest here! I just went through a major re-prioritization of everything in my life, alright? I’m done with all that, I’m done with Rei, and I’m done fucking around with you!”

“What are you *talking* about?” Nonon said even more incredulously.

“Oh, right, you don’t know about how I found out about empowerment, do you? What happened at that whole engagement party fiasco?”

Nonon remembered. “That night!” She blurted. How could she forget? That feeling of unconditional love, that overpowering urge to protect she felt from Ryuko. How even though she hadn’t created him, she thought of Saiban the same as all the other Kamui. It made her shift uncomfortably just thinking about it.

“I almost lost Satsuki. I mean, she almost *died*. I’ll never let anything happen to her, ever again. That’s priority one. Priority two is making sure nothing ever happens to the rest of you. And, uh, besides that, I could be a bit more honest with my friends.”

“But I’m not your friend anymore,” Nonon said.

“That will always include you too. You know what I mean.”

And Nonon sighed and said, “Yeah, I do.” Then, a moment later she said, “So if you’re being honest, answer one more thing for me. Who started things, between you and Satsuki? I mean who made the first move?”

“She...” Ryuko started, then stopped to try and think about how to phrase this. Because whether or not she was being honest, it was more important to try and make Satsuki and Nonon friends again than fix things between herself and Nonon. And Ryuko had to imagine it would be worse in Nonon’s eyes to be the one who made the first move.

“She told me it was her who made a love confession to you. Is it true?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can tell you that one. I’m not gonna throw her under the bus, never.”

“So she did make the first move.”

“Wha-I mean-” *Oh whatever, how bad can it be?* “Yeah alright fine, it was her, what of it?”

“It was?” Nonon looked genuinely surprised to hear it. “Why? I mean, why *wasn’t* it you? You obviously thi- er, you wanted to fuck her before then, right?”

“Seriously? Nonon I’ve been to, like, six different high schools since I found out I was into girls. I know what it’s like to ‘want to fuck someone’ but also know that you’ll never have her, no matter what. You get used to it. But Satsuki, you know what she’s like. She’s very romantic, feels things more deeply than like anyone I know, and she takes that seriously. And when would she have gotten used to that? She doesn’t take no for an answer very well either. So she just felt like, I dunno, so guilty and so torn up about it she couldn’t help it. She totally thought I’d never talk to her again, but she felt like she was lying to me.”

*“You know what she’s like”. Is that what Satsuki is really like under the mask she put on to rule Honnouji?* Nonon wondered. “Huh,” She murmured.

“Do you believe that then? Can we not talk about that anymore?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah,” Nonon was preoccupied, thinking about what she’d realized mid-battle. When Satsuki had told her “What I want doesn’t matter,” right before she left for Indonesia, Nonon hadn’t known what she meant. Only later did she realize that what she meant was that she had put all her personal desires on hold because preventing the destruction of the Earth was infinitely more important. But Ryuko would know her better than anyone, and there was no doubt that she thought that would be about the most painful thing in the world to Satsuki. And yet she’d endured it for nearly her entire life. That the seemingly indomitable Satsuki Kiryuin was actually quite frail, quite isolated, quite sad under her iron shell. *More fool me for having never seen it.*

And despite herself she found she couldn’t think of either of the Kiryuin sisters as monsters anymore. Not the way they probably deserved.

“Hey, so were you planning to just wait in here until the council meeting later?” Ryuko, eventually somewhat weirded out by watching Nonon think, stood up to go.

“Yes, I was.”

“So, um, can I go now? It’s just, um, it’s just Satsuki’s waiting for me in the lobby and y’know this has been a long time to be so far away from her.”

Nonon groaned as thought it were a big deal, “Fine, go ahead. I guess I’m done here.”

But as Ryuko turned to the elevator Nonon said, “Wait, hold on. I never told you the thing I called you here for in the first place. At the council meeting, I’m going to drop something really big. I need you to hear me out on it.”

“What? I don’t do anything at those, I just nod along.”

“But this time you do. I’m serious.”

“Well, you gonna tell me what it is?”

“It’d take to much explaining. Don’t worry I’m not gonna tell them your secret or anything,” Nonon smiled mirthlessly as she said, “But you are gonna hate it. I’m gonna hate it too. But it has to be done.”

“Uh, we’re both gonna hate it? Doesn’t exactly inspire confidence.”

“Just hear me out, okay? Promise me that much.”

“Aaalright. I suppose I owe you that much.”

“So glad you see it that way.”

This one wasn't part of my initial outline. I was looking back at part one to write the last chapter and I suddenly got the inspiration for how to begin Nonon and Ryuko's reconciliation. I'm going on a trip to visit family this weekend so I won't be able to write then, so rather than leave you hanging on the council meeting chapter I cranked this one out.

And if you think the detail about Ryuko liking Nonon's music is just out of nowhere, check back in part one. It's been there the whole time.



# **There's always that part of the legend where they try to refuse the crown**

## Chapter Summary

Alternatively titled “in which I demonstrate my deep knowledge about volcanoes”.

I know not a single person reads this to learn about volcanoes, but I just think they're neat.

And I'm back! New computer cuz I guess the old one just didn't want to live anymore, and I'm very happy with it. I'll be honest, I was so excited that it can run Planet Zoo well that I probably lost a day or two where I should've been starting this chapter. Sorry!

This was a weirdly hard one because I thought it would be fast and snappy like the last one but in order to fit in exposition/worldbuilding it just... wasn't. Oh well, I think it's pretty decent.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May 2067

~~~~~

A couple hours after Nonon and Ryuko had their confrontation in the war council room it was filled with the regular assembly. Kamui Corps headed by Nonon, conventional military headed by Satsuki, administration by the Prime Minister, and research by Aikuro – each on their respective side of the square table. Only this time Ryuko wasn't stealing the prime Minister's seat, she was sitting on the lower end of the administration side right next to Satsuki. And Aikuro had turned his chair a little off its place so he could have a better view as Houka and Shiro began the meeting, standing up in front a massive screen with a map of the Pacific on it.

“I'll start by thanking you for your patience,” Houka said politely, “I suspect bits and pieces of this presentation have reached all of you by now. We've had ample time to collect all the data on the current situation, so let us put all your questions to rest with the Research Complex's official conclusion.”

“Which is that our planet once again faces utter disaster!” Shiro burst with an oddly impassioned thrust of his arm. It was no secret that the eruption of Krakatoa had captured his imagination, and beneath the glint of his glasses his eyes were wide, lacking their usual grim detachment.

“Well, um, yes,” Houka acted surprised (as if they hadn't planned this maniacal vs. stoic dynamic beforehand), “You see, it is by this point obvious that the purpose of the large obelisks REVOCS are building is to trigger massive earthquakes at key fault lines, causing the eruption of volcanoes. And based on their position across the Pacific, there's only one larger purpose which they can fulfill: the simultaneous eruption of the entire Ring of Fire.”

The screen lit up as the map suddenly displayed hundreds of tiny red triangles. Volcanoes all across the entire hemisphere. Shiro explained, “Yes, the largest ocean in the world is surrounded by the largest volcanic chain in the world. From the Andes to New Zealand, the seafloor slides ever-so-slowly under the continents, melting as it does, and at a certain key depth the melt can separate, bubbling up to the surface in magma chambers. And then all it takes it a little push, and you get what our friends in the Kamui Corps witnessed firsthand last week.” As he explained, the screen changed to show a diagram of this process.

“Now, Krakatoa is a famously destructive volcano, and this most recent eruption lives up to this reputation. Initial destructiveness isn’t what I’m talking about though. The blast front itself was thankfully mostly dispersed during the battle itself by Nonon and Saiban,” Houka nodded in the direction of a proud Nonon, “But the corresponding earthquake still created a tsunami which hit several major cities along the strait and devastated them. Again though, those cities were already abandoned due to the war, and so not a single person died in the tsunami. Not really a problem even for the people who used to live there, because nobody will be going anywhere near the volcano for a long, long time.”

“It’s the ash.”

“It is indeed. Volcanic ash is created by the gasses dissolved in magma – yes, there are gasses in magma, as you may not have known,” As Shiro had not gotten yet tired of excitedly explaining to him. “Usually the intense pressure keeps them locked up underground, but given an escape route to the surface they expand rapidly, shattering some of the magma into the ash which you see steaming from the volcano. And it turns out that if instead of waiting for an escape route to naturally form you send a huge shock-wave into the Earth that vaporizes *all* the gases you get a *lot* of ash. Record setting amounts. Nuclear winter amounts.”

As Houka explained all this, a diagram again flashed by, along with footage of the eruption taken from the fleet’s security cameras, and finally pale grey drifts of ash several feet deep in the darkened, gloomy streets of New Jakarta. That was what it had been like when Nonon left, not a week after the victory. They’d given the city, and every other one they passed on their way out, another hole in the ash clouds to see the sun through. But it just wasn’t doing much good. It gave her chills, thinking about the cause of all that destruction brimming right beneath her feet.

“This is the condition of most of Indonesia now. On their own, ashfalls are difficult but far from a death sentence. Modern air filtration can keep it out of buildings, and gas masks can keep you alive outside. The first real problem which they’re facing is the lack of water. Clean drinking water from local sources was already hard to come across there due to generations of neglect, being used as a dumping ground by richer countries, and just the nature of islands. Now it’s impossible.”

The screen changed to show a graph labelled “agricultural productivity” which showed a sudden drop followed by recovery over an entire decade, “Bad enough, but as will become apparent in the coming months the ash is thick enough that even during the day very little light will get through. Add in some acid rain, and any local farming will be impossible. In order to simply survive they will need shipments of necessities, and considering that the ash makes flying planes anywhere near there impossible that means a constant rotation of ships. And those of you from the Bureau of Commerce will know that the government has already, er, ‘purchased’ a fleet of international freighters to serve that purpose.” Seized and promised to pay for later would have been more accurate.

At this point Satsuki tapped Ryuko on the thigh under the table and she suddenly perked up, interrupting him without really having her words planned, “Oh! Um, the Kiryuin Foundation can, uh, we can make a donation to pay the guys you took those from.” The commerce bureaucrats nodded and looked quite deferentially pleased – seizing the ships had been a very unpopular move, but they’d had nebulous assurances from higher up that it would be okay.

“Great,” Houka said, “Now we have a humanitarian aid fleet. For the foreseeable future, considering that every other nearby country is being invaded by REVOCS, we can expect to be the only ones helping Indonesia out. As you can see it could be at least ten years before conditions improve.”

“Grim, isn’t it?” Shiro now took over, “But then, this has happened before. Once a generation or so, although this is the biggest in a century. Looks bad, but nature will fix it. But that was just one volcano. There are one hundred and thirty active volcanoes in Indonesia. If REVOCS had actually erupted all of them...” He trailed off to let them comprehend.

“... Uninhabitable, even for bacteria,” Shiro finished dramatically, “For long enough that our grandchildren’s grandchildren might be the ones to recolonize it. Of course, REVOCS doesn’t just want to destroy a single of Earth’s tropical jewels. If they manage to complete the rest of the obelisk array and erupt the Ring of Recovery it won’t be ten years of nuclear winter or a thousand. It would be *millions*. Or – quite possibly, possibly enough that I’m sure this is what they want – forever.”

He chuckled to himself, brushing a strand of hair out of his face as the expressions of everyone around the table shifted. Some concerned, others skeptical. Nonon in particular was practically on the edge of her seat, tapping her foot intensely. Houka said, “Now, that may sound a bit extreme, but -”

“*But -*” Shiro cut him off pointedly, slamming his hands on the table, “There have been five major mass extinctions in the history of Earth, times when nearly all life was eradicated. And every one – *Every. One.* - is linked to a period of massive volcanism.”

“Even the one with the dinosaurs?” Satsuki asked, genuinely curious, “Wasn’t that with the meteor?”

“Ah, good question! Little known fact, it was both. A meteor impact in Mexico and a massive chain volcanic eruption in India at about the same time. Because that’s the thing, meteors hit every so often, large volcanoes blow every so often, but only at the confluence of these disasters is the natural world not capable of adjusting, of healing. And right now we might not have a meteor, but we have – y’know, *human activity*. The planet is already sick, we all know this. If the Ring of Fire were to erupt, it would be Krakatoa on a planetary scale.”

The map of the Pacific was back, showing grey clouds expanding from each volcano, spreading until the entire map was covered. It panned out to show the whole globe, and it too was covered, “All the ash means no sunlight; all the plants die. The gases contribute to those we’ve released creating runaway greenhouse conditions; the oceans acidify and the plankton dies. There is no food, there is no oxygen, and we and all the rest of animal life follow. We live on the congealed soup skin of a sea of death – a razor thin band of habitable space between the inferno and the icy void, and REVOCS is more than capable of closing that gap.”

“But... why?” Finally, someone asked the obvious question. It was Ira – he didn’t spend much time worrying much about life-fibers both because it wasn’t in his disposition and because Tekketsu

knew for a fact that there should more kamui, and he didn't want to come to the conclusion that something like that was too dangerous to be a reality. He was asking this for the first time, sitting up straight at attention with his arms crossed and an alert expression, but Ryuko, Satsuki, Nonon, Aikuro, Tsumugu, and all the rest of the scientists in the room had already come up with their own ideas.

"That's what's so interesting about it!" Shiro burst, so excited. "Because the life-fibers seem to be in direct command over REVOCS via their kamui, but they aren't harvesting anything from humans or any other life form, this is just killing us the same way our planet is already very good at doing. So we can rule out this being the work of human fanatics whose only goal is revenge against the whole species. At first, we thought it was simply disposal – if you found moldy food in the back of your fridge you'd throw it away. But then, when Nonon and Saiban had their encounter with Rosuketsu it said something interesting about it," He held a hand to Nonon, and she explained.

"They can't permanently kill Ryuko without destroying the planet because her human body, like, anchors her to it," She said succinctly.

Ryuko suddenly perked up again, "Oh, that makes sense!"

"Uh, does it?"

"Because when I was in the spirit world I tried attacking Rosuketsu and it bounced right back. You have to fight them and kill them in person, or else it doesn't work."

Houka pointed at Ryuko, "We're gonna have to talk about that one later." She gave him a thumbs up.

"Well there you go," Shiro nodded, satisfied, "So that's our best bet for now. But what that *means*, what it means that they still think they need to kill Ryuko. They're *afraid* of her. Of us. I – um - I realize this is sort of just for us in the kamui corps, everyone, but if the life-fibers are acting like we might be able to flip the script on them, maybe we can. Maybe it's good enough for you that we stopped Earth from being consumed, and they can keep doing whatever out in space, but if the life-fibers still are trying to destroy us all just because we might go further I say that should be our long-term goal."

There was a moment of silence for that to sink in. Even to Satsuki, whose had spent more time wondering about just how many other worlds the life-fibers had ended over an unknowable span of time and space, the idea that they might be brought to an end – or more accurately completely converted in a host of kamui – at humanity's hands was just... well, better to go day by day, deal with the challenges at hand, and worry about something so ambitious if the time ever came.

But Nonon said, "I think I might agree."

And to everyone's surprise, Ryuko responded, "Yeah, um, me too. But you gotta know that's like, *ultra* long term. Senketsu said it would take thousands of years before he's strong enough."

"-Wait, Senketsu is *alive*?" Nonon screamed suddenly, sitting bolt upright. Ira, Uzu, Aikuro, Tsumugu, they all whipped their heads around to look to Ryuko. Ira was smiling – Mako had explained some of how losing Senketsu had affected Ryuko, and he couldn't help but be happy for her. The rest were just shocked – a kamui back from the dead? They needed to know *how*, both to be happy for her and for their own peace of mind.

“Oh, but that’s wonderful!” The prime minister suddenly said with a happy laugh, “With Senketsu back, on top of the rest of you, we should have no problem stopping these REVOCS scum!”

“No, no no no, sorry but Senketsu isn’t *coming back*. He’s in his home, his natural habitat, whatever. But don’t worry, really, I don’t need him for battle, I’m way stronger than I was,” Ryuko responded cordially, fully aware how weird it was that the ostensible leader of the country had to cram his way into a discussion.

“O-oh! I’m sorry, Lady Ryuko, I um, didn’t mean to imply you were-”

“-I’m sure it’s fine,” Houka said breezily, and Ryuko nodded vigorously, “So, to summarize the topic at hand, the research complex finds that if left unchecked REVOCS will trigger a cataclysm capable of wiping out humanity. Does anyone object to this?” Nobody responded, “I see no objection, but then I never doubted your ability to convince, Shiro.”

Houka went on, “Now, we do have some good news to report too. We are in a much better position to face this danger than during the life-fiber war. The reconquest of Indonesia has on its own lead to the destruction of about ten percent of the obelisk array, and essentially rendered it impossible for REVOCS to return a rebuild it. Because everyone living there who they would have enslaved to build the structures either has a needle gun and knows how to use it or is dead. What’s more, it would appear that the fighting delayed the construction of the rest of the array – REVOCS devoted much extra resources and manpower to that theatre of war, hoping to complete and activate that section of the array before we could stop them. And they almost totally failed. This is a crushing blow for them.”

The map again lit up, using a red fill to show areas under REVOCS occupation – mostly the coast of China, Southeast Asia, east Australia, and the west coast of North America. Dots showed the positions of obelisks, X marks the ones which had been destroyed. Houka said, “What’s more, it’s becoming pretty clear that REVOCS really not prepared for a long-term war. We think their active membership – as in initiated cultists involved in the current mission – probably only reaches a few tens of millions at this point. Tokyo contains about as many people, not all fighters sure, but you can see it’s just not enough. So as we found in the reconquest they coerce local men and hire mercenaries to supplement, but this should become a lot more difficult for them now that it is obvious what’s at stake. We already found that plenty of the local recruits are willing to turn on their erstwhile masters first chance they get, now I wouldn’t be surprised if plenty of them are *expecting* us to come and free them. You might say they played their hand too early, and again, it’s to our advantage.”

“And lastly, the public is eager for war in a way they weren’t even a year ago,” Now as Houka continued explaining, a series of social media posts flashed across the screen, “Check any social media platform, at any time of day, and you’ll see thousands of new posts saying things like ‘last time, Ryuko and her friends were all on their own. This time they won’t be’ and ‘if you don’t stand with Matoi today, you won’t be around to regret it tomorrow’,” He quoted posts that came attached with patriotic icons of the flag and scissor blades attached.

“We even have people arriving from as far away as Europe asking where they can sign up to fight. Now, do a lot of them ascribe some spiritual significance to Ryuko and kamui in general which we try to discourage? Sure. But a year ago the nation was still peicing their lives together after Ragyo’s reign. Now times are good, and they want to give back. Frankly, I don’t know what they’d do if we *didn’t* press the attack now.”

“And lastly, most importantly, they only have *three* kamui now. We have eight, plus Ryuko. Sure, supposedly on a raw strength basis they are greater threats than our kamui, but as Nonon and Saiban showed us with just a little assistance from a team that *hardly* mattered. In fact, for those who might not understand this, Saiban is now stronger than Rosuketsu was. And – and this is critical – they do not have any nearly unstoppable threat like Ragyo, and we have Ryuko. If it really comes down to it, we can just throw her into the trouble spot and finish it.” And Houka smirked as he said, “But I seriously doubt we’ll have to.”

“And now, what you’ve all be waiting for, our official recommendation for our nation’s next move,” The screen changed to a simple bulleted list. Three words: Publicize, Mobilize, Attack. “Publicize: make sure the whole world understands what REVOCS is doing, that they *see* our victories, that they know we are coming. Mobilize: We have been using half the Kamui Corps as a defensive force in Japan, but the reconquest has proven that our improved anti-life-fiber weaponry can make ordinary people stand on equal footing with uniform-based armies, provided they are well trained and lead. Let’s use conventional military forces to defend our shores. And finally Attack: On multiple fronts, bringing the full force of kamui to bear on them! Conventional military forces following in our wake will arm the people and prepare them to take back their counties, and we should leave our ace – Ryuko – where she can respond if there’s ever a crisis. I wouldn’t suggest bringing her in on the first wave of attacks at all, it would just lead to her being too far away if a major disaster started unfolding elsewhere. But again, we have more than enough forces to simply overwhelm REVOCS in Korea and Australia at once, and then we take the fight to the mainland,” He finished with gusto.

“Sounds good,” Nonon said, “So, what’s the protocol on getting started?”

“Well, we just need the council’s official approval.”

“You’ve got mine, this is exactly what I was thinking anyway.”

Houka smiled smugly, it was good having his best friend back, “I should hope so.”

“I concur,” Satsuki nodded, and all her generals nodded with her, “This is a very well constructed plan. You’re strategic instincts have only grown sharper with time.”

And Ryuko added with a smile, “Yeah I’m happy to stay in reserve. You guys have been rockin’ it so far.” Her kamui all glowed warmly at that, and that was a great reassurance. Even if her relationship with Satsuki wasn’t sitting well with all of them, praise from her still meant a lot to her creations.

“Uh, I do approve of this,” The prime minister said, trying his best to stay official – technically it was his approval that really mattered but he could read the room. What was he gonna do, say no? Even think about whether or not he should approve? No, clearly that wasn’t why he was here.

“Splendid!” Houka chirped. “Now, the other members of science team will give some presentations about the specifics and how this is going to affect all of you. And then finally Nonon will close out the meeting with a proposal for how we can deal with the, uh, current political situation in Indonesia.”

~~~~~

“No.”

“You promised you’d hear me out!”

“Yeah, I am,” Ryuko said, suddenly red-faced and snappy, reeling from what Nonon had just suggested. “Believe me, if it were anyone but you up there I would’ve already left the room.”

“You’re aware this isn’t my idea, right?”

“What’s it matter! I-I mean, the idea that you can just pick whoever’s strongest to-”

“- to be the head of state is... it’s barbaric, is what it is,” Satsuki finished Ryuko’s sentence, scowling in a way she rarely did anymore.

Everyone’s eyebrows shot up, shocked. Well, those of them whose eyebrows hadn’t already hit their hairlines as they read the stacks of papers Nonon had placed in front of them. Drafts for something, not quite a law, not quite a constitution. There was simply no precedent for what was in them, no due process, no checks and balance. What did you even call a document that proposed the crowning of a monarch?

Nonon wasn’t phased though. She’d prepared everything – written those documents herself, spent nearly a week doing nothing but arguing with Indonesian generals, public leaders, and priests. And today she’d done her best to make this whole thing as palatable as possible. Hell, she’d even convinced Rei to take guard duty instead of attending the meeting, using both the logic that someone had to do (and Rei liked doing it) and that seeing Ryuko might be painful for her. It wasn’t like either of those things was untrue, but really Nonon suspected she would be the most likely one to resist. Well, the one most likely to resist who Nonon wasn’t suggesting become the dual monarch of Japan and Indonesia, anyway.

So she, standing opposite Ryuko and Satsuki at the table, took it surprisingly well and calmly said, “I’m hearing a bad initial reaction. Anyone else got anything they want to say? Let’s go around the table. Remember, I didn’t come up with this, I’m just a mediator here.”

Ryuko muttered, “Then they could come up here themselves.”

For a while, silence reigned. Eventually, a thin and wizened old general with big, round glasses and a white mustache said uncertainly, “Is there not some trouble with the implication of, er, ‘Queen and Protector of the Nation’? Perhaps we should consider a title more like ‘First Citizen’?”

Nonon blinked, staring at him with a stunned expression. Finally she sighed and said, “Okay, we’re having some issues with the name. Does anyone else have *anything* else? Specifically reasons why it wouldn’t work?”

“I actually happen to agree with general Yagi,” Satsuki spoke scathingly, “The implication of the name does matter if you understand just a little context of the times we’re living in. Since the mid 20s – if not earlier – the global trend has been the collapse of representative governments into corruption and internal strife. In their wake countries fragmented into dictatorships, who really are puppets for the mega-corporations – members of connected families rule them just how I controlled Tokyo from Honnouji. They used fear and religious belief – especially the second one in cases like the American Empire – to keep the masses in line. In Japan the collapse of the central government meant the military schools took over public policing, but different factions took over everywhere. And it’s been terrible, for nearly everyone. I shouldn’t need to remind you, of course, that this was all part of REVOCS’ plan? My mother’s plan?”

“Yeah, I know that, but-”

“And now, we in Japan suddenly overthrew the mega-corporation that controlled us, revealed to the world that the entire corporate structure was based upon an alien doomsday cult, and gained a group of young, intelligent leaders who are universally beloved and have nothing at all to gain from the previous power structure. It’s a chance to correct the course of history back towards something like a democracy, towards an enlightened form of government and another one like it might never come again.”

“I mean sure, but I don’t see how this changes that. She’d be a figurehead with no real power. Lots of perfectly functioning countries had figurehead monarchs. Nobody here is losing their jobs, elections are still gonna happen. Won’t even change her life that much.”

“Figurehead!” Ryuko cried indignantly, “What about this *ten pages* of emergency powers!”

“But none of those monarchs had millions of screaming fanatics who thought they were divine beings,” Satsuki responded to Nonon. “*That* is the exact sort of thing the dictatorships do. What Ragyo did. Figurehead now maybe, but given enough time nobody will remember what it was like not having an immortal queen ruling over them. Wouldn’t any democracy still operating by then feel quite hollow? Wouldn’t more and more responsibilities find their way towards her?”

Nobody really knew what to say. It was a good point, eloquently stated. Uzu leaned over to Tsumugu and whispered, “Get me out of here man this is supremely weird.”

“You can always just go to the bathroom,” Tsumugu responded, and nobody really paid Uzu any mind as he quickly chugged his entire water bottle and excused himself.

Nonon, only slightly less confident than before, said, “It’s not like what we have now is so great. I mean, it’s a one-party system and of the people in this room I think only, what, a fifth of them were actually elected? Let’s be realistic.”

Again, everyone shuffled uncomfortably as Satsuki looked oddly hurt by that and said, “We are *working* on it.”

“I know, I know. But there’s a bit of a thing with the world being in danger right now, so maybe it’s not ideal but can’t we just put the rest of that on hold until the danger is dealt with? I mean, that’s what you did, and here we are now. You have to work with what you’re given, and what we’re given is a nation who is so fanatically obsessed with Ryuko that they offered her this even though she’s never even been there, and our own people who also love all of us enough that they won’t have a problem.”

“And that’s another thing!” Ryuko added, “I can’t even speak their language!”

“I mean I’ve gotten pretty decent at it, foreign languages aren’t as hard as people say.”

“To Ryuko’s point, I really can’t see how we don’t look like conquerors in this. You say we need to think about the necessities of the moment, and that’s true enough, but these are consequences that will last far longer than the present danger and I think we should consider that.”

Ryuko nodded and said, “Yeah, what she said. Plus, I’m just not doing it. I mean, this is crazy, none of the rest of you seriously think... I should...” She trailed off, eyes wide as she saw the grave looks on everyone’s faces. Her eyes darted to Tsumugu and Aikuro – they’d always fought against



Kiryuin tyranny, sure this would all be insanity to them. The look of resigned, simmering frustration she got from Tsumugu said it all. If there had been a better option, they would have found it.

And everyone else in the council, everyone who hadn't know her before she became Lady Ryuko, The Girl Who Saved the World, they had profound, awed looks on their faces. Like they just realized they were taking part in a moment in history. Issues with the name or not, they didn't seem to doubt that she deserved this.

*I guess I was right. Having a normal life isn't possible, She realized, Didn't I say I'd take every opportunity the world threw at me? Okay, yeah, I did say that, but I wasn't expecting **this** !* A part of her really was tempted to just say *"Sure, fuck it, what's a crown when people are already making statues of me"*. But there was no way they wouldn't all calm down in a week or two and realize what a stupid, pointless idea this was. The people Nonon and the others had liberated were just caught up in patriotic frenzy, scared of the volcano, hoping she would protect them. But even she couldn't do anything against a volcano. *I mean, at least I don't think I can do anything about it.*

And besides, Satsuki sure thought this was a bad idea.

But then the prime minister said reverentially, "Lady Ryuko, we'd be honored if you would consider -"

"-Okay, what the fuck is going on here?" Ryuko stood up. "A-am I on another planet or something? C'mon Sats, let's get out of here."

"Ryuko, wait," Ira held up a hand to her, pausing Satsuki as she stood, and calmly said, "I agree with you. This is not at all what I expected or hoped would come from unseating Ragyo. At the same time, *I* don't think there's any comparison to be made between you holding this honorary title and her reign, either. And I'm, uh, I'm sorry that we're seriously considering this," He said, a little awkwardly. "It's an unbelievably huge commitment to ask of anyone, we all know that, right guys?" The last part came out as a challenge.

"Absolutely," Shiro affirmed.

"I sure wouldn't want it," Houka said.

"It's your choice, Ryuko," Aikuro said.

"And you can take time to think about it, of course," Tsumugu added onto Aikuro, "And, uh, if Uzu were still here he'd say the same I'm sure."

"Yeah, he's not coming back," Nonon said, "And, yeah, I get it too. I'm pretty sure there's never been a single king or queen in history who didn't go a little nuts from all the stress, 'cept those who were already nuts. Believe me they were hoping you'd be *way* too involved, I've watered it all down a lot."

"I mean, I appreciate that man, but-" Ryuko started saying to Ira.

"-And besides, if you did promise you'd hear Nonon out, you do need to hear her out. In full."

"Oh, alright," Ryuko groaned, taking her seat once again.

Satsuki followed suit, and after she'd rearranged her papers and everyone had cooled off a bit she said, "Well, all that said, there are things I like in this plan despite its many *glaring* flaws."

"Whu-really?"

"Whu-really?" Ryuko and Nonon said at nearly the same time.

"For instance, this ensures a peaceful transition of power in perpetuity, as any new party that takes over the government will have to have Ryuko's backing, which will confer them complete legitimacy in the eyes of most people. That's an amazing thing for any country to have. I think that, although these are included as optional, some of these ideas for Ryuko's involvement in national holidays – appearances at major festivals, special ceremonies – those could be very popular. I actually think we should do those either way. And lastly, I'm open to the idea that this may be the best way to preserve the political unity of newly reconquered Indonesia."

Nonon's face was blank, taken aback. Satsuki's whole demeanor had suddenly shifted from scathing to conciliatory. *Oh of course, I'm not talking to a Satsuki who's being real with me, she's doing a meeting right now. Even though what she's saying is all the logical arguments for and against my plan, that has nothing to do with how she really feels about it. Both demeanor are masks. Because it's not about what she wants, so if I wanted to find out what it is she actually would like to happen, I'd have to ask her myself.* But what that was didn't seem to Nonon like an unknowable, black void anymore. It was something very human, very close to her heart. Nonon hadn't failed to notice how the moment Ryuko had said "C'mon Sats, let's get out of here," she had been prepared to walk out. Whatever it was she really wanted, it was *all* about what she thought was best for Ryuko.

What was best for Ryuko? Oh please, she'd be fine either way.

"Hold on now, why's that though? Why's this whole 'double queen' thing essential to Indonesia? I mean, I get we need to help them, but why this?"

This Nonon was prepared to explain, "Not 'double queen', I know you can read and it says it on the first page: 'personal union'. Basically, the two countries are independent, but because they're nominal ruler is the same person they're united closer than just being allied because its an alliance that will never be broken. Means we can send them resources and send our politics-types down there without any paperwork or borders, and refugees from there can come here with no trouble either. But more importantly, having your endorsement is the only thing that will keep them off each other's throats."

"Really? Because I kinda feel like-"

"-Thing is, it's an island country. Every island has its own culture, its own dialect, and usually they get along fine but in a situation like this not so much. They're gonna vote for a new president soon and say they elect someone from Kalimantan, which they probably will since it's the most populous, mark my words in no time at all there'll be people saying 'Oh, he's hoarding all the resources for his home island and leaving the rest of us to starve!' *Even if he's actually not.*"

"Oh."

"The way you stop that from happening is if there's someone who outranks him, someone who is second only to the voice of god to – let's be real – almost everyone including outside Indonesia,

who can be there to say ‘No he’s actually doing a perfectly good job’. And also, y’know, checking to make sure he is.”

“But isn’t it kinda weird though, I mean I don’t really want to *encourage* them to think that way of me.”

“And that’s another thing,” Nonon went on in spite of Ryuko’s protestations, “You have no idea how many different interpretations of you there are. I-I mean, there’s some people who think you’re some sort of weird, gender-less, amorphous cthulhu thing crammed into a woman’s body,” No need to mention that that’s essentially what Rosuketsu had said she was. Nonon was fully convinced that whatever Ryuko really was, she was also as human as she or Saiban.

“Which I find myself thinking is sort of homophobic,” Satsuki said abruptly, and then sort of glanced around. Maybe nobody else noticed, but Nonon picked up on just the faintest uncertainty. Was Satsuki experimenting with letting an unfiltered thought out, “It implies that they are more uncomfortable with the savior of the world, their religious figure, being a woman in love with another woman than with her not being even remotely human. And aren’t the people who believe that mostly former priests? A conservative group, no doubt.”

Ryuko kept her mouth tight shut. No use confusing everyone by trying to explain that those priests had a point, but that Satsuki was also correct.

“Huh. Never thought of it that way. But you see that’s what I’m saying, they all agree on that you’re really, really important, and when we were there kind of acting like part of the same group it worked out fine because it was like they were all banded together, helping our cause. They assume we’re all of one mind and one purpose, you know, I’m sure that’s plenty ironic to you all too,” Despite herself, Ryuko chuckled at that one. “But obviously we need to open up other fronts in the war, and so all these different denominations will start to schism apart if they don’t have *you* to keep them united now. And I guarantee you everywhere we go the same thing will happen. There will be fighting. People will die because of it.”

“Keep them united by doing *what* though?”

“Mostly just being there,” Nonon shrugged, “But you will need to act the part, it *is* a responsibility.”

“Act the part? I mean, I just ain’t an old fashioned ‘queen Elizabeth of England’, kind girl,” Ryuko said the last part in an extraordinarily broken and cockneyed sounding attempted at English. Was that the trace of an amused smile Nonon spotted briefly flickering at Satsuki’s lip?

“Obviously,” Nonon said tersely, “But look, you have to figure that out either way. Because – firstoff, you are really gonna live forever, right?”

“It looks like it, yeah.”

“That on its own changes everything, you gotta see that. This is all backwards because usually people start out by liking what somebody is saying, following their ideas and getting inspired. And then later they start to revere them. But when you’re a fuckin’ supergirl and all your friends are super too I guess to most people it’s so obvious that whatever it is you’re about you *have* to be revered. But that doesn’t mean they have any idea what they’re supposed to do with that. What are the beliefs attached to you? They’ll fight forever if you don’t give them something. And it’s not just Indonesia, you might not believe it but the whole world is waiting for you to tell them what you’re

all about, to give them some sign and - look, we can all tell this is freaking you out, obviously, but you need to think about it,” She finished snappily.

“It would freak you out plenty too!”

“Sure, but at least I’d get to be the one deciding! Believe me, I’m not too happy with the idea you might make them think the meaning of life is just to slack off and party.”

“You *know* I would not!” This was quickly devolving into shouting between Ryuko and Nonon.

“Accidentally I mean!”

“I’m done with living like that!”

“Well good, then you should have plenty of time!”

“Hold on a minute!” Against his better judgement, it was Aikuro who decided to cut in, “I think we’ve spent long enough on the pros and cons of this idea. Ryuko, the simple truth is that the survivors of the reconquest are all of one mind about this. Even the ones who don’t revere you still respect you. This is what they want, believe me I was there. And I know it seems crazy but it would work. But at the same time they’ll understand if you don’t want to commit to anything, again they all respect you too much for you to let them down.”

“Right, the only person who’d be let down is right over there, because she can’t use me to make sure all her hard work doesn’t go to waste,” Ryuko said sarcastically.

“Exactly, so just... take some time to think it over,” Aikuro said, “Go down there yourself. They’re good people, and it would really help all of them out in this time. You don’t have to decide now. And as for the people here, I know it sounds crazy that they’d want a queen too. But what we put it to a public vote? An election, just to a position that’s for life. Does that sound good to everyone?” There were approving murmurs around the table.

Nonon sighed, watching Ryuko weigh what Aikuro had said and finally said, “Yes, maybe I do have a little bit of a stake in this whole thing. I won’t apologize for that. But I am sorry, because maybe I explained this all wrong. Think of it this way: if there were some problem, some enemy that even we couldn’t take down on our own, you’d drop everything to come help, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course.”

“And let’s say if somewhere way in the future some like crazy fascists or whatever get control of the government, you’d step in and stop them no matter what the rules were, wouldn’t you?”

“I uh, I guess so? Probably, yeah.”

“So why don’t we just make it the rules now that you’re allowed to do that? If you would do it anyway. That’s all this is. It’s just so that everyone knows they always have you, and really the rest of us too, watching their backs. Think of it that way. I can edit it even more, make *sure* that’s all it is. Think about it.”

And Ryuko did think about it. As they all stared, she absently reached for Satsuki’s hand under the table, other hand to her chin. *Stop looking at me. I don’t even know how you all should be looking at me right now, but trying to put a crown on my head is definitely not what you should be doing*

*right after finding out about me and Satsuki. Or maybe this is some kind of punishment, in which case I think I underestimated Nonon badly.*

*“I just-” She started, just can’t believe this is real? No, honestly I guess I can believe someone would suggest it. What I really can’t believe is that if I say yes, it’ll happen. But yet if she said no, there was nothing any of them could do to stop her. Take every opportunity that comes my way. Can I really say no, knowing that people will probably die if I do? Can I really say yes if it’ll be essentially saying ‘yes, I am a goddess’ to everyone who doesn’t know me personally?*

*Well, only one thing to do.*

“I need to talk to Senketsu about this. Go ahead on holding the vote though, I think. If that’s what people really want, maybe it should just stay out of my hands.”

## Chapter End Notes

I think there's something about a lot of people who think about fantasy worlds (including fanfic writers) where we kind of enjoy imagining our favorite characters advancing in society and taking positions of power, especially if they come with cool titles. People in general seem to like stories about monarchies, even though we don't like monarchies. I guess I can say that part of what I'm trying to do is explore that concept very directly, and with ambiguity about whether it's supposed to be a good thing.

I hope it all feels in character, I wasn't able to fit in as much "inside character's heads" stuff in this one and because of the situation Ryuko and Nonon are maybe more cordial than you might expect (only slightly though).

# What's the matter with those Kiryuins?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May 2067

~~~~~

Nonon had a lot on her mind as she knocked on the door to Satsuki's office, so she didn't at all expect to find Ryuko there. Maybe she should have, Ryuko had said that fifteen minutes was a long time for her to leave Satsuki's side and it wasn't like there had been time to leave the research complex in the few minutes since the council meeting ended.

But she'd had more than enough of Ryuko for one day. It wasn't even the council meeting, no, that had gone almost exactly as she'd expected. Finding out that Ryuko liked her music though, loved it even, and had never told her – that she *knew* that was a stupid, immature thing to do and how hurtful that was to someone whose life was basically a half-and-half split of music and kamui battles.

That was something totally different.

Because they were both on the same page when it came to fighting. So if Nonon had only known, if Ryuko had only said something back before, they would have had everything Nonon cared about in common. They *should've* been friends, they should've been best friends!

*[Just sharing interests doesn't make someone a good friend,]* Saiban had reminded her, *[It matters if you actually want to spend time with them.]*

But Nonon hadn't hated being around Ryuko and as Ryuko had just confirmed today she felt similarly. Oh, sure they got on each other's nerves sometimes, but Nonon had never had a female friend where that wasn't the case. Well, except Satsuki, of course, but as Nonon was becoming increasingly aware Satsuki's outward personality was almost entirely fabricated, a mask that even she had never seen behind. With Ryuko at least you knew you weren't getting a mask.

*If only she wasn't the way she is. Hell, if she wasn't, maybe she wouldn't have ended up with Satsuki in the first place.* But what was the matter with her? To Nonon, it was painfully obvious that Ryuko was fucked up mentally in some subtle way. But she could no longer agree with her previous assessment that she was little better than an animal, a hoodrat with simple, crude desires and no filter, ruined by her lack of education and discipline. No, that couldn't explain it. So what was wrong with her? Could she be made better?

It was all so confusing. So was this growing sense that a future where she had to be cordial to Ryuko didn't feel like a violation of everything she believed in. It felt weirdly like something she could do.

Today, Satsuki was much simpler. Today was the day Satsuki would finally drop the act, and rather than scaring Nonon as it had before, today she had a pretty good idea what to expect.

~~~~~

So yeah, she was a little taken aback to see Ryuko sitting on a couch off to the side of Satsuki's desk, embroidering a sundress on a tailor's mannequin (short ish in stature with a large bust and hips, this appeared to be something for Mako). And yeah, it showed when Ryuko scowled at her, clearly no more happy to see Nonon than Nonon was to see her.

"Hey, I was hoping I could talk to Satsuki?" Nonon said as politely as she could manage.

Ryuko waved a dismissive hand and said, "What, seriously? I think you've caused us both enough trouble today! Get outta here!" And the look on Satsuki's face, though not a scowl, was definitely troubled. Ryuko didn't seem to be exaggerating.

*[Oh dear, so that's what she really thinks of our plan,]* Saiban noted a little sadly.

But Satsuki reached over and took Ryuko's hand, saying, "No, it's alright. Would you mind waiting out in the hall?"

Ryuko was still glaring though, so Nonon said, "Not about anything important, I just wanna talk to her." And when Satsuki nodded, Ryuko caved.

Ryuko stood, giving Satsuki a quick kiss, and then exited the room with her tailoring supplies still strewn about.

Once she was out of the room Satsuki motioned for Nonon to sit in the chair on the opposite side of her desk. As she sat, she could tell Satsuki already seemed quite off guard, saying, "I must admit I didn't expect to see you so soon. To what do I owe this visit?"

"Well, before I -,," Nonon began, then said, " - Y'know Ryuko can still hear us, right? Could you send her further away?"

"I don't really think there's much point, she'd be able to hear from anywhere in the building. You ought to get used to it, around here Misaki and Izanami listen in on everything."

As if on cue Misaki's bored sounding synthetic voice cut in over the loud speaker, and she spoke as though reading a standard disclaimer: ~ *"All security camera footage will be cataloged for later analysis."* ~

Satsuki smiled warmly, "I wonder which of them is listening in right now. Probably Izanami, Misaki has actual security threats to monitor, so she's unlikely to take an interest until the part where they edit out anything incriminating. Whereas I'm sure Izanami anticipates something gossip-worthy." Reacting to Nonon's bemusement (she knew that the kamui supercomputers had really stepped up their surveillance while she'd been gone, but this was the first she'd seen of it), Satsuki said, "It's not so jarring after a while. I can never misplace anything for long anymore, one of them will have seen where I left it. Now, to what do I owe this visit?"

"Do you remember what you said to me, just before I left back in November?" Nonon began seriously.

"Ah yes," Satsuki sighed, "You had asked me what it was I wanted. What my 'endgame' was. This was, if I remember correctly, in the context of my continued de facto control over the war council, and several other matters of state besides. In spite of my claims that I wanted to hand over that control to the new government."

“Yeah, that’s right, but-”

“-But, and correct me if I’m wrong, but I detected more. You wanted to know why I had gotten involved with *Ryuko*. I can only imagine that prior to learning that, you thought even the idea of entering such a blatantly incestuous relationship would be unthinkable to me. It only makes sense, considering what you know about... me, my personal history. And it only makes sense that it might make you worry that I was in truth just as corrupt – politically and morally – as Ragyo. That despite what I claim I wasn’t glad the Honnouji days were gone but in truth I mourned for them, and wished I could have gone ever farther. That I was not – in effect – the person you thought you knew. You wanted to know if I had been deceiving you, possibly even for as long as we’ve known each other.”

*Well, in one way she hasn’t changed. She’s just as perceptive as ever.* “Yeah, that’s it. So I’m sure you remember what you said. That we’d talk about the answer to that question when I got back, that it was irrelevant what the answer was until I did.” Satsuki opened her mouth, likely to say something on the lines of “*And so you’ve come for those answers*”. And though even now Nonon almost hesitated to interrupt her, she said, “But I think I figured it out myself.”

Satsuki extended a hand, palm up, to indicate that she continue, “I guess it was simple. You meant that you intentionally put your desires, yourself, aside until Ragyo was defeated. That to stop her you had to be a very specific way, so whatever it is that you would’ve done otherwise I never saw any of that. So maybe you are just as fucked up as Ragyo inside, I don’t know, but you were able to at least act like you were better because that’s what you needed to play your role in saving the world.” Now that she’d got it all out, Nonon took a deep breath. It felt so weird to lay it out that simply, made her think, *Okay, but what does that really say about her? That can’t be the whole thing.*

“A-and let me just say,” Nonon went on, “that I’ve thought about it, especially since the battle, and I think just being able to do that makes you better than her. I mean, at least you have the *discipline* to be better than whatever you really wanted to do. It would have to mean that everyone else’s lives matter more to you than yours. I – I mean, you could’ve always been a rich playgirl like the rest of your cousins even if you knew we were all doomed. I’m sure dying before they got old would’ve suited them just fine.”

“Oh. Well, um... thank you?”

“But I don’t know if I even think that you’re *that* bad. Y’know, I always said to Uzu that you were emotionally stunted, but I don’t think I really understood what that meant. Because I always just thought you weren’t really very good at talking to people, at flirting and getting a girlfriend. Maybe that you just weren’t the kind of person who wanted those things. But it turns out that real problem was you – I guess – wanted something only Ryuko had. And that you like the political power even though you do believe it’s wrong because old habits die hard. And maybe that’s not really evil the way Ragyo was. So that’s where I’m at, and now I’m here to find out the rest, like you promised.”

“Hmm, so whether I’m an evil person who managed to fight down their nature or something a little more complex?”

“Uh, yeah, you could put it that way.”

“Well Nonon, I’m not surprised by this but you so far you seem to have it all correct. Mostly. I like to think *something* of my personality has come through in all this time. But you understand why I



waited to explain, don't you? It seems simple, but I think my reasons wouldn't have struck a chord so well until the fate of our world was more personally on your shoulders. Was I right?"

"Oh, totally. I didn't understand at all until I was out there, looking at Mataro as he tried to earn himself a kamui, and I realized that life-fibers were here to stay and it was on my head to rep the side of coexisting with them rather than letting them wipe us all out. It's a lot different, when it's all on you."

Satsuki nodded, "Coexisting with them. Yes, I can see you do understand. But I don't suppose this changes much..." Satsuki trailed off, and there was a lull in the conversation because at this point Nonon wasn't ready to pronounce her final verdict.

Nonon had her hypothesis now – that in truth Satsuki wasn't really evil or even all that immoral but just purposefully deprived of life's experiences and now was desperate to get them, maybe even resentful she'd had to wait so long. So now that she'd found someone that she liked, nevermind why, she wasn't gonna let go of her no matter what sorts of stupid taboos might get in the way.

But that didn't mean they were friends again, as Satsuki so clearly wanted. Because Nonon was reassured, but still felt betrayed. That all the years she'd poured into Satsuki, not just for the mission but for everything else besides, weren't enough to get her to open up. Nonon had been afraid that was because Satsuki knew that if Nonon glimpsed the perversions in her heart, she'd rightly be disgusted. But if it was just that she didn't care to, that still wasn't something she could easily forgive.

But how to say that so blatantly? Would Satsuki be mad? What if she had her wrong? In that case Satsuki's wrath would be even greater, and the thought was still scary. The woman across the desk – no matter how Nonon's esteem for her had fallen – still had a towering presence, an unshakable composure. It was only natural to admire it.

"So when did you first find out?" Nonon asked.

"When I was four," Satsuki answered, "My fourth birthday, actually. That was when my father first showed me Junketsu."

~~~~~

May 2048

My father came to observe me during a tutoring session early that morning. Afterward, he administered a comprehensive and really quite grueling cognitive aptitude test, followed by a test of my athletic abilities. Seeming satisfied, he then said to me.

*"Kiryuin Satsuki, I have something very important I want to show you. Something important not just to me, to you, but to all of humanity and all of life on Earth,"* He said, after my tutor left. I had already learned where the security cameras in my quarters were, so I knew that he had somehow disabled them. Needless to say my interest was piqued. *"However, you do not have to come with me, you have a choice. If you want to live a peaceful life, just get up and walk away. But if you think you won't be content not knowing the truth, you'll come with me."*

Obviously, I followed. He took me to his lab and showed me Junketsu. I transfixed, it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, so pure, so sleek. I think the realization that I would one day grow

into a woman who could wear it was maybe the most thrilling thing of all. As I stood there open-mouthed, he put his hand on my head and said, *"This will be your wedding dress."*

Of course, I had only read about the concept of marriage, what even a regular marriage meant emotionally was utterly beyond me. So I simply asked, *"To whom am I arranged to be married?"*

*"No man. You will be married not to one man, but to the fate of all mankind."*

And then he told me everything. The true nature of life-fibers, what Ragyo really was, her intentions, what he claimed had become of my sister. And what I had to do. We spent quite a while there, as he poured everything he knew about the enemy, everything he had planned, into me.

*"And when you put this on,"* He said, *"That will be the beginning of the end for you. From that day forward you will be bound to the life-fibers, win or lose. Even the strongest human could only withstand wearing Junketsu for a few months. But during that time you will have a power unmatched in the world. Your finest hour; but also your last. When the time comes, you must not hesitate, however. There is no path to victory in which you do not wear this kamui and accept your death."*

*"I understand father. I will stop her, no matter what it takes,"* Not what a typical four-year-old girl would say, I know, and I think he realized this because he had averted his eyes at this point, though there was no change in his tone of voice.

*"Good. But you should realize it may not be you who lands the final blow. I cannot tell you what exactly will happen, but even Junketsu may not be enough. Use the Ki ryuin conglomerate's resources to bring people into your service who you can trust not to reveal the secrets of life-fibers, who may do what you cannot. But they are not your shield, do not try to use them to avoid your fate. You are the only person who you can guarantee will face their own death without flinching, remember that."*

I must not have seemed very phased by that, because he said, *"And you're okay with this. Now that you know, you must devote your entire life to the mission, even unto death. How do you feel about this?"*

And I said, *"Now that I know... I know that I will die whether I act or not. If I have to act to save everyone else, then that is what I'll do."* Without a shred of self-grandeur or doubt. I had to make sure he knew I wouldn't let him down. He must have known, because he turned to go then.

*"I think at a time like this there are things that would usually be said, like 'I'm sorry' or 'I wish it didn't have to be this way'. But the truth is I'm not sorry. This fight is everything. There is no choice but to win, no matter the cost. It would have been crueler to leave you ignorant, to deprive you of the opportunity to do what is necessary just out of affection."*

*"Yes, you're right. But, father?"* I said as he was about to leave, *"What will you do?"*

*"Ah,"* He smiled, but his eyes looked empty. I can only imagine mine did too, *"For that, I am sorry."*

Not too weeks later, he was dead. Or, not dead, but gone. They told me it was freak car accident, of course. If I had any lingering doubts they vanished then. That very day I broke into his lab and made copies of as many of his notes as I could, which I hid in the floor boards under my bed until Shiro was old enough to use them. Then I began to prepare myself, mind, body, and spirit.

“Jesus,” Nonon said simply, hearing the full story for the first time.

*[What kind of child reacts that way to learning that their mother is going to destroy the world and only they can stop it? To learning how they are going to die?]*

“Who the fuck *says* that to their *daughter*?”

Satsuki was taken aback, “Nonon, he – look, I don’t want to give the impression it was easy for him. I didn’t really understand it until much later, when I didn’t want to burden you with the knowledge either. But you seemed unwilling to let me walk my path alone, so eventually I began to see my father’s point that it would have been crueler to let you watch me destroy myself without knowing why. I see now though that I didn’t tell you enough.”

“And you really believed once you told me and I agreed to help that I was going to die too, didn’t you?”

“It’s what our toast the night before the grand festival was about. Breaking the glasses, you remember? That was to be the first and last drop of alcohol to grace our lips, symbolic of the adult lives we were giving up so the world might be saved.”

“Well sure, of course I remember, but I think we all hoped that it wouldn’t come to that.”

“I didn’t. I really did think that that would be the last day I ever lived.”

“So you just believed him then? That was fourteen years before how could he have known what would happen?”

“He was more right than he could have known. Even he had no idea how formidable Ragyo was when she decided to exert a little effort.”

“... Four years old, huh,” Nonon murmured, and her brows furrowed angrily

“What?”

“I just never you were fucked up from that far back. I mean, I guess I’m glad you listened to him or else we might not be here, but still your father with that ‘I’m not sorry’ bullshit. I mean, what kind of parent could say something like that?” Nonon said heatedly.

“I have sometimes thought,” Satsuki answered calmly, “That he was not the kind of person who should ever have had children. But I never knew him well enough to say. He did the best he could in the circumstances given, and I’m grateful I was intelligent enough that he could count on me. I have to believe it was all worth it.”

*[Yes, I suppose she does. To be so singleminded from so young, what would someone like that want from the world once their reason for being was gone?]* Saiban’s limited life experiences didn’t give him any adequate answer.

Nonon considered that, asking, “So what is it?”

“What is what?”

“Your endgame? If that’s the origin of your... self-repression, I guess, what is it you’re trying to do now that it’s over?”

Satsuki’s eyes were faraway as she said, “This might be disappointing to you Nonon but. I don’t have one. I don’t have anything in particular I’m aiming towards.”

“What? Seriously? Well, what about REVOCS? What about your grad school thing, you’re still making a dissertation out of all the sociology stuff we learned at Honnouji, right? A-and what about the country? What about democracy, or all the things you’ve done to fix the economy?”

“Sleepwalking,” Satsuki said simply, then, as though realizing maybe that wasn’t a satisfying answer, said, “Oh, don’t get me wrong, *all* of that is very important. And I am necessary, being in a position of influence and as well read as I am. But... none of that really makes *me* feel anything like the purpose that I once had, nor the challenge. I felt as though I was sleepwalking.”

“No,” Nonon scoffed with a halfhearted chuckle, “No way! I mean, winning the war against Ragyo was the best thing that happened in any of our lives! Life was easy after that til the REVOCS conflict heated up, but that was nice! You can’t tell me that wasn’t the best thing we could’ve hoped for.”

“I’m so glad to hear you say that, really. But for me...” Satsuki trailed off, she’d only ever told Ryuko this, and only then in one of their extended post-coitus snuggling sessions that lasted long into the night. And she should’ve told someone else a long time ago, “... For me, it’s felt like everything important in my life has already happened. I expected to be dead by now, and to find myself alive just means,” She stopped to sigh and steel herself, “It just means I’ve had to keep going without any real point to it.”

“Satsuki! You can’t say something like that! Don’t you dare tell me you really considered – you really considered *killing yourself*!” Nonon was quite abruptly utterly distraught, to think Satsuki had been bearing the depressive worldview under her very nose.

“No! No, goodness no! I would happily meander about until I was a hundred years old just because I can,” Satsuki said quickly, waving her hand dismissively, “I merely mean that compared to saving the world, everything that comes after is an afterthought. And that since I never really considered the possibility that I might survive, I never really thought about what would come next.”

“I just – but then why? Why are you dating Ryuko then? Why do any of it? I thought you were gonna give me a reason and now you tell me there isn’t a reason?” Nonon said insistently.

“I did say it might be disappointing,” Satsuki concluded sadly, blowing out a big breath as she processed how long it had been that she’d held off admitting that to Nonon. It wasn’t as bad as she’d expected, not when the pity she’d feared was replaced with frustration and disbelief. Nonon wasn’t inclined as she might once have been to make this into her problem, to force Satsuki to decide that it really was a problem. “You know,” Satsuki said, feeling more free to speak, “Ryuko didn’t plan on surviving either.”

“When she was at Honnouji? She certainly seemed to.”

“From the start. When she first came to Honnouji her goal was just to find whoever killed our father and avenge him, or die trying. She was homeless, with no money and no relatives, so she

thought even if she managed it that she would spend her life in prison, unmourned. But of course it didn't take long after she met the Mankanshoku's for her to realize that protecting them was far more important than her vendetta. And then when she found out what she really was – as you might remember – her sole goal was to kill Ragyo and Nui and die in the process, thus ridding the world of life-fiber hybrids for good. Fortunately, once again Mako managed to pull her back,” Satsuki said with a wistful smile, “I owe that woman a debt I don't think I can ever repay.”

“Oh, *that's* what she was thinking. I guess that makes sense.”

“So you see, she understands. She's had an easier time building her new life, but she understands. I'm just grateful, really, that I can be a part of it.”

“You say that like you don't think you deserve it,” Nonon said scornfully.

Satsuki frowned, “Deserve doesn't come into it. I just feel lucky. She understands, but doesn't make a big deal of it. She's just so... happy to be with me. I don't feel pressure to find anything worthwhile to do with my life. I suppose,” Satsuki said slowly, working through this all out loud, “That I live for her now.”

With a strained little growl of exertion, Nonon leapt up from her seat and *slapped* Satsuki right in the face. Fast and strong and lacking any thought behind it besides a burst of rage, her hand turned Satsuki's head completely to the side. Satsuki yelped, high pitched and undignified, as she clutched at her reddening cheek. Almost as quickly Nonon gasped and flinched. *Oh, oh no! I can't believe I just did that!*

*[Your heart is beating so fast,]* Saiban said, *[Did you expect to drop dead on the spot?]*

“Nonon!” Satsuki exclaimed, shocked.

Nonon didn't know what she expected. Definitely not this. To see Satsuki so frail, so vulnerable to attack. Here she sat, with Saiban and the strength to move mountains in her hands. And there was Satsuki, just a lone human. Never knowing the security of always having Saiban there. It finally hit Nonon just how lonely, how sad this woman she'd always thought indomitable really was.

“What's wrong with you?” Nonon fumed, “What about us? Weren't we enough? You never stopped to think how Ira, or Uzu, or Houka, or even Shiro would feel if they knew you had nothing to live for! You never thought to ask *any* of us for help! You think we don't care if you live or die? What about *me*! After everything I've done for you – slaved away my whole childhood, killed tons of people, abandoned my family!”

“Abandoned your-”

“What else would you call it? Not like I had a choice, but when you wind up killing your own brother-”

A look of horror struck Satsuki, “You... did that? The file just said he was killed in battle, but that was you?”

“Yeah, it was!” Nonon responded stridently, “And I thought I was jumping ship to another family, but turns out even *before* the whole Ryuko thing – whu – hey, Satsuki!”

She was *crying*. Not just a few tears, but whole sobs ripping from an ugly, contorted mouth. Satsuki's hand was over her eyes, propping up her head in her lap. The color drained from Nonon's face.

*[You've gone and overdone it once again. These Kiryuins, whatever you call it that's scarred them, it's the same between them.]*

Realizing belatedly that she may have overdone it, Nonon quietly crept around the desk to gently rub Satsuki's shoulder. "Hey, hey Satsuki, it's okay, really. I didn't even really know him, I didn't really feel anything," Nonon lied, trying to console her. A frail, lone human should be protected, stupid of her to come in here with rage and accusation. Not like she could believe she felt nothing, knowing where those scars on her fingers came from.

"No! No, that's exactly why it's *not* okay!" Satsuki leaned back in her chair, trying to wipe away her tears as she choked the words out, "Normal people don't feel nothing killing their own family! Oh, I should have known, I should have known this would happen. I made you *like me!*"

"No way!" Nonon recoiled.

" 'S true. 'S true, and I'm no better than my father. I-I'm sorry, Nonon," Satsuki grabbed Nonon's hand, her grip even now firm but gentle.

"Oh, I am an idiot," Nonon murmured for Saiban's benefit, and she hugged Satsuki.

"No, stop that," Satsuki protested, but didn't make any move to try and throw Nonon off. Not like Nonon would've let her.

In due course, the sobs gave way to sniffles, and Nonon let go when Satsuki shifted to produce a handkerchief with which she carefully dried her face. Her eyes were red, but otherwise her composure returned, albeit a bit more relaxed. She was even smiling, relieved to have finally gotten that out.

"That was crazy," Nonon finally commented. "I don't think I've *ever* seen you cry before."

"Indeed. It's something Ryuko's been helping me with."

"What, getting in touch with your emotions?"

"No, expressing them. I can assure you I have always felt them plenty."

"She's no substitute for a therapist, you know," Nonon said snidely, but not aggressively. A seal had been broken between them, hostility vanished. Nonon knew for sure that she was seeing the real Satsuki now, and no, she didn't the real Satsuki was evil.

"Hmm," Satsuki hum-chuckled, "But, to be honest, that kind of advice is no small part of why I hesitated to let my problems slip. I don't want to offload my troubles onto other people."

"No, I think you don't want to admit that you can't beat this on your own. But that's stupid," Satsuki's eyebrows flew up, and Nonon said, "It is. Some things are better handled by professionals, especially mental issues. Besides, you don't seem to have a problem dumping it all on Ryuko."

“Ah. Got me there. I guess perhaps I was frightened by the prospect of ruining your admiration for me. Now that that admiration is gone already, it’s easier.”

“Well, not all gone. I mean, since you were *four*. If I’d have known before I found out about you and Ryuko, I mean holy shit having just the most willpower of anyone ever is one thing but doing it while *that’s* what’s been going on inside your head? I’m just... happy to see you finally opening up. Being a little more normal. I guess now I can stop worrying that you were deceiving me. You’re still Satsuki.”

“Oh, oh well that’s -” Another snuffle choked Satsuki off as her eyes began to tear up again, a faltering smile on her lips. She had to wipe her eyes again, but before Nonon could hurry back over she said, “No no, it’s a good one this time. If I’m sad for anything it’s just... all the wasted time.”

Nonon said, “For the record though, you’re wrong about me. I’m not like you. I chose this life, I *like* this life. It’s the only thing really fulfilling for Saiban, and so it’s the only thing for me, too. I’m not giving myself up for dead by taking saving the world on my back. And... I did feel something when I killed my brother. I nearly went berserk. I realized he might as well have been a stranger, and that... it was bad.”

“I’m so happy to hear that. You’re doing great, you really are.”

“You were right about one thing. You said it would be my victory, and it was, and it was pret-ty sweet” Nonon chuckled, “I just hope I don’t end up a junkie for this stuff.”

Satsuki nodded, then said, “Do you think Ryuko will come to like a life like what you’ve chosen?”

“What, as queen?” Nonon noticed that there was no “if” in Satsuki’s question, “No, I think she’ll hate it. But in that way where she’ll love to hate it. And I bet she’ll think it’s worth it in the end.”

“Hmm. Me too. I think – no, I know she’s already coming to terms with the idea that it’s necessary. She hasn’t said as much, but I think she knows that if it does go to a vote, it’ll be a landslide. Did you know, she had plans to open up her own boutique? Custom designed clothes, made just for each customer and no-one else. It was a nice dream, simple. It’s a bit sad that it’s unlikely now, but I suppose I’ve come to terms with that.”

“Really? Because you seemed pretty opposed before.”

“Oh, it’s still a terrible idea. But terrible ideas sometimes become reality, and sometimes for a reason. If a uniting figurehead queen is what we need to secure the victory in Indonesia and spread it across the world, then I’ve done far worse for the sake of the world. I think we both know at this point, that will always be what matters most in the end. I just... I can’t do it full time anymore.”

“Well, you don’t have to.”

“Hmm?”

“Like I said, this is what I chose,” Nonon stood up. It was time to go, though she no longer was sure she’d gotten what she came for. It kind of didn’t matter. This felt... good. Like a future of one day calling Satsuki her best friend again didn’t feel like a violation of everything she believed in. It felt like something she could do. “Take a break, let me take the lead. Just make sure Ryuko plays her role and I’ll be happy.”

“But... why?”

“Call me curious. I guess I kind of want to see what you’ll do now that you have something – someone – worth living for.” Before Satsuki could say anything, she added, “But don’t expect me to be friends with her or anything. She’s still a fuckin’ piece of work, what you see in her I still can’t fathom,” That came out half a joke, and Nonon smiled as she said it.

Satsuki smiled back, “She’s both the most and the least like me of anyone. I think you can figure out what that means.”

“You sure do love your metaphors or whatever that’s called. But yeah, I get it. I mean, I still don’t *get* it, but I do know exactly what you mean. Y’know today she also finally told me something she should’ve a long time ago,” Nonon began to leave, but turned at the door and said, “Oh, and one last thing. You remember that piece of music you sent me just before I left? I finished it. Maybe sometime I could play it for you?”

“Really? Well, I would love that.”

~~~~~

As Nonon feared, Ryuko had absolutely intended to listen in, but she wouldn’t get the chance because following mere paces behind Nonon came Tsumugu, striding purposefully down the hall with his trademark scowl. From the moment he locked eyes with Ryuko her face instantly set with an exasperated “oh boy, here we go” expression.

“Thought I might find you here,” He said, crossing his arms as Ryuko leaned on the door.

“Hey man, glad you’re back in one piece,” Ryuko said. She was worried such an intense start to the conversation but that was no reason to dispense with politeness (that and of course she really was glad). “What’s up?”

*[Take a guess,]* Reiketsu said.

Ryuko chuckled, “Oh man, you know after the bombs Nonon’s already dropped on today I’m sure even if I guess right I’ll still wind up surprised.”

“I’d bet that you’re right,” Tsumugu answered.

“Right. I’ll bite. It’s Satsuki, isn’t it?” Ryuko sighed. She threw her arms to her sides, stood up straight, offering herself up for him to verbally eviscerate. “Go ahead, let me have it.”

“No. I won’t be doing that. Word is Nonon’s already done enough. Although I could. Out of all the stupid, irresponsible stunts you’ve ever pulled, this has to be the-” He stopped himself, “No, we’ve talked it over with Aikuro and Nekketsu - and before I go I should say we can talk freely here, Misaki is scrubbing the security footage and blocking the doors to the hall - so we talked it over and in the end have to agree with him. You’re adults, closed doors and all, and considering you never knew each other growing up I really don’t see anything emotionally perverse here.”

“Really? Wow that’s... surprisingly charitable of you?” Ryuko was genuinely shocked, from phone calls with Mataro she knew that Tsumugu had been quite pissed at one point.



“You still should know better,” He said with the weight of a judge passing a sentence. “This was not my first reaction. But, that being said, now that we’re here, I have an obligation to do what I can to keep this from getting out and ruining both your lives. For that, there are two things you need to know.”

“Unsurprising. Well, go for it.”

“One: You need a foolproof alibi to explain your parentage. Two: Only one exists, and it involves doing something I really hate.”

“What’s that?”

“Lying to my family.”

“Huh? Wait...” Ryuko tilted her head, lips pursed with confusion.

“Well, think about it Ryuko. The publicly available information about your birth is this: Isshin Matoi was a researcher working for the Kiryuin Conglomerate. For whatever reason, it was you that they chose to test the process of hybridization on, however your father had discovered what Regyo was really up to and faked your death and then feigned quitting the program in grief. After that he went into hiding and began routing his patent money through offshore accounts to start forming Nudist Beach. None of that is very far off from what actually happened. However, there’s a glaring hole in this which I’m sure you can see.”

“Who’s my mom then, huh?” Ryuko correctly surmised.

“And there’s only one woman of appropriate age who knew Soichiro Kiryuin before he faked his death and changed his face, who went with him to found Nudist Beach. And who I know for a fact was having an affair with him while he was still married to Ragyo. And who didn’t look implausibly different from you.”

“Wait,” Ryuko abruptly understood. Just the realization gave her a chill, “Holy shit dude, are you really sayin’ what I think?”

“I am. Ryuko as far as the whole of the world is concerned, your mother was Kinue Kinagase.”

“Wow....” Ryuko turned to him with a smile that was so sweet and genuinely touched that all his residual anger evaporated. “You’d do that for me?”

“Wha – of course!” He exclaimed then, somewhat embarrassed, continued, “It has to be done. If you leave even a little window of doubt someone might one day investigate it.”

“So you’re my uncle,” Ryuko said thoughtfully, nodding along that yes, it did have to be this way. “And I guess I have new grandparents now too...”

“You adjust to this surprising quickly,” Tsumugu grumbled.

“Well sure, I mean I did already get adopted by the Mankanshokus, so – ah wait, how’s that gonna work?”

Tsumugu shrugged, “Nothing will change. I know my parents already suspect, but as you know they haven’t tried to contact you.”

“Aw, they do? What’re they like?”

“Well, polite enough to not want to look like moochers to you, that’s for sure,” Tsumugu answered, and Ryuko chuckled, “But they’re both physicists, like Kinue and I were trained to be. I think you’ll like them.”

“I’m sure of it.”

“Well, you like Satsuki somehow. They’re definitely the sort who prefer to end the day reading in an armchair. It was a very quiet household growing up.”

“Heh, that’s kinda funny, considering,” Ryuko gestured to herself.

“Oh, you’d be surprised. We both had our rebellious years. And the extended family might be more your speed to. I’ll have to tell you stories about our family reunions sometime. Like the one when we in college and Kinue broke both her arms racing using these cots from the hotel we were at.”

“No shit, never would’ve guessed,” Ryuko smiled, “Sounds pretty seamless then. I’m… thank you, seriously. I don’t even know what to say.”

Tsumugu clapped her on the shoulder, “You and Satsuki, it has to work out. This has to be worth it. I’m serious, even for you I don’t love doing this.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about!” Ryuko said confidently, although in truth even the thought that *it not working out* existed in the realm of possibility filled her with dread. *It will work out.*

“Good. And also-”

“Wait, let me guess. I also have to accept this whole queen thing.”

“No. But it would help. That extra level of safety, honestly it’d a good way to make sure my family gets something material in exchange for this lie. As well as a… necessity, Nonon’s right about that. Are you going to say no?”

Ryuko sighed, leaning back against the wall with a thoughtful look, “Man, did you know I had this whole plan to open up my own, er, boutique, tailor’s, clothes shop, whatever you wanna call it.”

“First I’m hearing of it,” Tsumugu said, leaning next to her.

“Yeah, I only ever told Satsuki. So here’s the thing though, it’d be custom jobs only. ‘Cuz If I started making my own design line everyone in the world would want it and soon they’d be so expensive only super rich people could have them. And that sucks man. Plus, I think if you’re designing clothes you gotta make something that’s really for just one person. Something that really expresses *them*.”

“I didn’t know you had such strong opinions about this.”

“I mean, I wore REVOCS clothes all my life. Mass produced crap,” Ryuko said scornfully, and Tsumugu burst out laughing just at the concept of what a “*fuck you*” that was to Ragyo. “I wouldn’t even charge, cuz again it’s not just for rich people. I’d hire some people to look through applications, and when they thought someone had a good reason fly them in from anywhere to make them something. Could be weddings, graduations, parties, I even thought it’d be fun to like try making super good hiking gear for like an outdoorsy guy. No funerals though. And that way

we'd weed out as many of the people who just want to resell their clothes as possible. The storefront could just be a little hole in the wall in Tokyo, it'd be great."

"Wow, that's very thought out."

"Yeah, I've been working on it the last couple weeks. I just thought it'd be nice to have something I knew for sure I could do, not even saying it'd be like everything I did. Just a bit a' regular work to keep me busy."

"Makes sense, you certainly don't need the money."

"Yeah... too bad it ain't gonna happen though."

Tsumugu grunted. "You can say no, you know. If that's what you want nobody's forcing you."

"Nah, I said we're putting it to a vote, so that's what they'll do. And then whatever happens happens."

"You're going to," Tsumugu stopped to try to think of the right word, "Win the vote?"

*[Get elected,]* Reiketsu suggested. *[You realize there's no way they won't vote you in, don't you?]*

"I don't want to think about it. I really don't. When Sats and I went official I said to myself I'd take every opportunity that came my way now, but I mean what even is the opportunity here? Where does this lead? If we go reconquer another country am I gonna be 'in charge' of three countries, then four, then five and on? That's nuts, I mean where's it end then?"

"I don't know. Nobody expected that we'd be back to another apocalypse level threat either. I never expected I'd have a kamui. I guess the only thing I can be sure of is I can't predict the future for shit."

"Heh, you got that right."

"I know I said I wouldn't berate you about Satsuki, but since we're talking about the future I need to know. Why now? You were keeping it secret for months at least. What about right now made it the right time?"

"Ach, I dunno. Life's short man."

"Funny coming from you."

"I mean for the rest of you. For her. Sats nearly died at the whole Australia debacle. Who knows when she might be in danger again. She could die at any time, and I'm *not* gonna let her go and live forever having had this chance, and then never taking it. That, and also Houka totally saw the whole thing threw Satsuki's earpiece so we just straight-up blew it."

"Oho! Now that makes more sense," Tsumugu laughed.

"Well sure but that doesn't make the first part less true!" Ryuko said, "I mean, look at you. Look at you and Aoi. You waited until after the war to go official, what if we hadn't won?"

"We'd be dead?"

“Okay, but now, you’ve gotten married, you’ve got a house, you got it pretty good. I mean, what’s the next step for you? Kids, eventually, right?”

“Eventually,” Tsumugu nodded, “We’ve talked about it, and we thought – well no, I thought – that we weren’t ready for it.”

Ryuko whistled in response, “Whew, she wasn’t happy about that one was she?”

“Oh c’mon, you know Aoi. She was fine,” Tsumugu said dismissively.

“Well okay, but now we’re back in this shit, so it doesn’t matter anyway because you’re gonna put your life off until the world is saved again, right? But this is like a whole huge fight over like multiple continents, who knows how long it’s gonna take! How long *are* you gonna wait, you’re just a few years from thirty and then you’re past your prime.”

Tsumugu narrowed his eyes, “I don’t like how much thought you’ve put into this. You never put this much thought into anything.”

“Well whatever, my point is that even though there’s important, fate-of-the-world level stuff going on right now, but I think maybe that’s just how our lives are gonna be. And if we do win and there’s not some other crazy war, you’re really gonna have your kid in the aftermath? Don’t you want them to be able to see what we do? They won’t get it otherwise.”

She could hear Reiketsu murmuring to Tsumugu. They hadn’t considered the possibility – would their kids grow up to wear Kamui of their own? Might they even possibly be hybrids? Even just a year ago Tsumugu would’ve said no, never! But when he was half kamui already, it was harder to say that.

“You really told her you didn’t think you were ready?” Ryuko asked innocently, snapping them from their thoughts. “I mean c’mon dude, I think out of all of us you’re probably the best equipped. ‘Sides Mako, but that’s just ‘cuz Mom’d be right there telling her what to do.”

Tsumugu chuckled and shook his head, “You’ve become quite manipulative without even trying. You really are like your mother.”

“Wha-hey man, that’s not cool!”

“I wasn’t talking about Ragyo.”

~~~~~

That evening Tsumugu returned home with a bouquet, a bottle of very expensive wine, and a painting for the living room he’d meant to buy a while ago but kept putting off. When Aoi, quite pleasantly surprised by this unusual behavior, asked him why he just said.

“Well, life’s short. We should enjoy things while we can.”

Another beast of a chapter, but still somehow a little shy of the word count of the first part. That will soon be fixed though don't worry.

I am really trying to make the developments in each of our three main characters (Ryuko, Sats, Nonon) pretty fundamentally shift them while also keeping within their character too. I was rereading my old chapters and I realized one thing I've kind of been slipping on is "writing the way people talk" as in having the sort of weird shorthands and redundancies of conversation. I'm gonna try to bring it back, let me know how I do. Although in part that's just because there are fewer examples of regular casual conversation in this part than the first just because of where the story is at.

# Catching up: Satsuki and Mataro

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May 2067

~~~~~

It didn't take long after returning home for Mataro to realize there was nothing he was looking forward to more than training with Satsuki.

No doubt it was almost unbelievable luxury to be in his own bed, with all the smells and peaceful sounds of his parent's apartment surrounding him. His mom's cooking, watching sports and playing video games with his dad (as much as he could with the blindfold), it was like he'd never left. Except all the little things that made it obvious he'd been gone too long. Although her doubts about his safety were (mostly) banished, Sukuyo's affection was honestly smothering. Every little thing was taken care of, laundry done almost the second he threw it in the basket, his favorites (and only his favorites) for dinner every night, the constant hugging and telling him how much she loved him. Like, he got it and wasn't about to start resenting it, but it was starting to be a bit *much*.

Aside from which it was clear his schedule had shifted compared to theirs. Now that they were empty-nesters who didn't really need to work, they got up late and didn't do much. For him the compulsion to fill the day was so strong that he kind of missed being woken before dawn by kamui transforming or distant artillery. It meant another day of adventure. There were only so many times he could run around the same old streets before it became apparent that there really wasn't anything going on. Even just the day to day stuff felt off, he'd gotten used to having his own quarters to use how he liked, it was weird having to time his meals and his showers and everything around other people. That was just how Mako had said it was staying home for the holidays now that she had her own place with Ira.

And hanging out around the neighborhood with his old friends from school was even worse. It was painfully obvious from the first that something was off. The way a hush fell when he arrived, the way they wouldn't crack jokes at his expense anymore, the way they were too scared to even ask about the reconquest but hung on his every word about it.

Maybe it was a mistake to wear his sword to see them.

What they really felt towards him he didn't know. Jealousy, awe, maybe even fear. He had left the boy they knew, a normal kid devoted to this seemingly pointless dream – adjacent to the kamui sure but not at their lofty heights. And now he'd come back as a man who moved with easy confidence, who word had it had tangled with ruthless Russian mercenaries, crazed cultists with superhuman powers, and even sea monsters. Probably even slew them with that very blade. He'd come back as one of *them*. Which, Mataro could see, lead his old friends to conclude that he had always been one of them, just posing as a normal kid.

It was obvious, listening to them talk about exams, college applications, what universities they heard had good parties, where they thought they could get into that the course of his life had irrevocably parted from theirs. And he didn't feel any scorn towards them, no superiority over their more boring future. Why should he? That was just how things went.

But they weren't his true friends anymore. His true friends were waiting for him. He'd proved himself to Nonon, Ryuko had never doubted him, now only one person whose decision really mattered remained.

~~~~~

He arrived to the clattering of shinai. This early in the morning, Uzu's dojo was only open for private practice and even the instructors who taught and trained there weren't up yet. Only one person would be dedicated enough.

Her plus one girlfriend-turned-bodyguard who had to come along no matter how it interfered with her rest.

Satsuki and Ryuko were dueling across the whole of the mat, dashing back and forth with their unmatched speed and skill. Mataro had no problem waiting and watching, he had come to appreciate the craft and though Ryuko had always been good this daily practice with Satsuki was making her truly great. If it hadn't been before it was now fair to say he was watching two masters at play. Kamui practice wasn't quite the same since those high octane fights focused more on grappling, improvising, working to each opponent's unique talents and weaknesses. A far cry from the simplicity of old fashioned swordplay (though Mataro certainly didn't think that made it worse). He watched their twirling hakamas and the smiles on their faces and thought:

*Yeah, I think I can continue to accept this. It certainly feels like a perfect fit.*

The round went to Satsuki in the end with a clean strike across Ryuko's chest. "Oof! Nice one!" Ryuko exclaimed, then turned to Mataro, "Yo! Bro! Long time no see!" She leapt over to him and scooped him up a hug. She gasped, "You brought it! Well, don't keep us in suspense, let's see the sword!"

Happy to oblige, Mataro gracefully drew his ninjato with a flourish (not over the mat of course, live weapons weren't allowed in the practice area). The blue-black blade with its lightning pattern glinted in the light.

"Oh, *awesome!*" Ryuko exclaimed, immediately gushing over the obvious artfulness of the sleek weapon, "Hand-and-a-half, huh? And such a light, thin blade! You're gonna love this one, trust me," She ruffled Mataro's hair affectionately.

"Uh, as if I don't already?" Mataro responded.

"Yes, quite a lovely sword," Satsuki agreed as she came over, "but then, I expect nothing less from our armory."

"Think of a name yet?" Ryuko asked.

Mataro sighed, "Not really. It's hard man, I don't want somethin' tacky!"

"Oh I know, believe me," Ryuko chuckled, "I never came up with anything better than 'scissor blades', did I? But then dad was gonna call them 'rending scissors', so always remember you could do worse!" Satsuki lightly tapped her on the shoulder then, and Ryuko nonchalantly said, "Welp, I'm gonna go change and try and get started on a dress pattern."

*And now it's my turn, Mataro thought with a thrill as he also turned, heading in the other direction from Ryuko towards the men's room. What will she have me do to get final approval. Am I even good enough to hold my own yet? Frighteningly, there was a very real chance he might not be.*

"Where are you going, Mataro?" Satsuki asked mildly. Mataro stopped.

"Uh, just going to get changed."

"Perhaps I'm missing something but, what for?"

*Something's off. She called me Mataro, not Mankanshoku. Does she... did she not expect we'd get back to regular training when I returned? I guess I didn't make that clear.*

"I was hoping we could train a bit?" Mataro responded, trying not to let his puzzlement show.

"Oh. Well, I suppose I could spare a little time for sparring, why not?"

Something was indeed deeply off. He expected her to instantly snap into "old Satsuki" mode, but no. *She can't possibly know I took my blindfold off, there's no way! I mean, how could she even keep that close an eye on me?* Mataro thought nervously as he slipped on his gi. *There's no way she's **still** taking that seriously, right?*

But when he emerged Satsuki was no less gentle and friendly. The scowl wasn't there, just a peaceful, meditative face. She said, "Let's warm up with the basic forms, why don't we?" and Mataro's fear amplified drastically.

But he wouldn't let himself believe it, not yet. *Maybe it's because my training is over, maybe she's treating me like an equal now.*

He had to believe it when they started actually sparring though. No brutal beat-down, trying her best to force him off the mat. They traded blows evenly, to Mataro's advantage even. She wasn't even trying.

His face must have showed his distress because Satsuki paused and said, "Mataro, is something the matter?"

"Well yeah! When I said training I meant real training, how we used to. Kamui training!"

Now Satsuki's face did fall into a bit of a frown. Not all the way to the old scowl but disapproving, deeply so. "But you abandoned your training," She said simply.

"What?" Mataro meant to yell, but it came out hoarse and quiet. His heart simultaneously fell with dread and rose with fury. This couldn't be happening.

"You removed your blindfold. The terms of our agreement were quite straightforward. You removed it, and this was the sign that you had given up. I suppose being *half* a kamui wearer is good enough for you," She motioned derisively towards his lone sword resting by the edge of the practice mat.

"No! I didn't-" Mataro exclaimed in a panic.

"Please, do not demean yourself with useless attempts to lie. I can assure you we both know the truth."



“No I mean I didn’t *mean* to! I didn’t think you’d find out! I didn’t think you’d still remember!”

“Oh? Then that is even more damning,” Now Satsuki’s voice was dripping with all the menace she could muster, “That you would so callously risk throwing away something you did indeed value. And simply for *sex*. ”

*Oh my god. She **has** been watching me!* Mataro didn’t just feel enraged he felt *disgusted*. What gave her the right! How could she possibly think such an intrusive surveillance was okay! She must have known he would slip up, she must have been just waiting to pounce. She never intended for him to complete his training after all.

“How?” He demanded “How did you know? How could you?”

“How? What a foolish question, do you really think I don’t keep in contact with my subordinate generals? I ordered Uzu to track down that girl... Diah, correct? Your final exam, you might say. But the results do not reflect well on you,” Satsuki seemed to be reveling in this cruelty. She sighed and strode off past Mataro, off the mat and towards the training room, “It’s disappointing, really. I was hoping when you came along we might spend a pleasant little while catching up, sparring at the level you’re comfortable with. But if this is all you’re here for I may as well just head to the office.”

That did it. Mataro hung his head, voice near breaking, “Can you at least tell me, were you ever planning to let me have a kamui?”

“No. To desire a kamui is to desire to fight and kill. It is a foolish thing. Don’t be too upset though, it is better this way. I will be much happier to see you safe and comfortable in the world we protect rather than risking your life on the battlefield-”

When Uzu was a teenager, he never came anywhere close to landing a surprise attack on Satsuki. Her instincts were too sharp, her reflexes too quick, her body too devoid of tells to warn him she knew he was coming. Now he might have been able to manage it, but there was still the slim chance of it ending in embarrassing failure.

Mataro came within a literal hair’s breadth. Satsuki was sure she’d goaded him into attacking, but he hadn’t taken the bait. He really had given up. Or so she’d thought, until at the last second it occurred to her – *something’s not right*. If she didn’t lean forward in that moment Mataro’s shinai would have given her a nasty whack right to the head. She had no idea he could move so silently!

As it was she gasped, the neat bun she’d tied her hair in came undone as the hair-tie was slapped to the ground. But Mataro wasn’t done and his followup came as he surged forward, teeth gritted, slicing back up as she turned around. She only barely managed to block it, though by the third now she was no longer surprised, no longer so briefly vulnerable. They exchanged a flurry of strikes before she pivoted, backed up again, springing softly onto the mat while Mataro rushed after her, swift but far from reckless.

“What is the meaning of this?” She said when at last she managed give herself a little breathing room from the furious onslaught.

“One dirty trick deserved another,” He hissed as he continued to press. He kept low, head held forward to bait attacks, trying to get in and nullify her reach advantage. That wouldn’t work, Satsuki flexibly jabbed back even when he was nearly headbutting her, but at the last moment he

rolled away behind her and began to press from another direction. Still no luck, but the determination to find some way through that invincible defense powered him on.

“What, do you suppose this is your true final exam?” Satsuki scoffed, spying the moment when he tilted to far to the right and suddenly stealing the initiative, pushing back on him with perfect, rhythmic strikes. Then, as she so loved to do, suddenly that rhythm broke and sputtered as she threw in a brutal vertical slice with totally different timing. Against lesser fighters it was nearly impossible for them to see what she’d even done, but Mataro just barely managed to block it.

“I don’t care! All I’m gonna do is hit you. For once, I’ll actually manage to hit you!”

They fought on, dancing across the mat from the front doors to the koi pond to the weapon racks and back. It was when they were over by the pond that Mataro used his small stature to his advantage. There were vertical wooden beams that separated the area around the mat where spectators could watch from the gardens around the pond, and he scooted around one of them and Satsuki was momentarily unsure which side he would come out on. When his head appeared on the left she swung for it, but just as quickly he ducked back, bringing his own shinai across so that hers was trapped between it and the beam. And then he put his right hand on the blade above her shinai and pulled with all his might. With a fierce *crack* the thin bamboo snapped, clattering to the ground as Mataro whipped back around to press his attack on a now disarmed foe.

A dirty trick, but it still wasn’t near enough, for Satsuki could target his wrist as though the shinai wasn’t even there. The first time she snagged him he managed to keep his hold, twisting around even as she executed a painful judo grip in an effort to pop the blade from his hand. He kept his hold on even as it meant forcing himself to leap up, onto her shoulders, and back down the other side to keep his wrist from breaking. The second time though he wasn’t so lucky, as Satsuki swept through his rush of attacks and punched him in the gut before trying it again, at which point his weapon thudded to the mat.

Not like that ended things because in no time Mataro responded with a flurry of punches and kicks. They fought hand-to-hand, Mataro preferring to make swift, precise direct attacks while Satsuki blocked and countered, ever looking for a chance to use her own preferred tactic – capturing and pinning him. Lesser fighters training with her were rarely able to withdraw their blows before she could snag an arm, too imbalanced by their own momentum to recover as she dragged them to the ground, but Mataro had learned this too, it was Tsumugu to whom he owed his hand-to-hand lessons.

They had both lost track of the time, and maybe if it hadn’t been so early in the morning one of them may have begun to slow even a fraction. Not Satsuki, of course, she had her iron endurance. But not Mataro, obviously, he was younger. As it was it really seemed they could go on all day.

But Satsuki did have a job to get to.

They found themselves near the weapons racks. Satsuki managed to get a rough grab on Mataro’s gi and hurl him back a few yards, where he landed on his feet.

“Good,” She said, finally letting the act drop a little. *I truly didn’t expect he could deliver such entertainment.* “However,” She reached to practice weapons behind her.

A boken. Hard oak to the shinai’s flexing bamboo. A blow with this heavier implement, swung with maximum force, could easily break bone. “I think I’ll feel more comfortable with this.”

Mataro had no choice but to retreat. He could not get through Satsuki's reach unarmed the way she had penetrated his. And she was holding nothing back now as the boken whooshed through the air in huge, wide arcs. He scrambled backwards, still dancing nimbly but never gaining ground. This was the angel of death who had so terrified Ryuko even before she wore Junketsu, without a single life-fiber on her. It was like she was eight feet tall, she towered over him.

He managed to recover his shinai, rolling over it and snatching it from the ground. Now he could try to fight, but it would have to be different. He used the tactics Aikuro had taught him, the ways nudist beach had learned to fight a far, far stronger foe. He glanced his blade off hers rather than deflecting straight on, kept his arms close, his feet straight under him so he couldn't overextend himself. And it worked, even against the lethal offense of the angel of death he wasn't done yet.

Until he was. Satsuki finally pushed him to the edge of the mat, and when his balance shifted slightly she caught him by the ankle. Not a bone breaking blow, just enough to hook him and flip his feet out from under him, causing him to fall on his back as Satsuki smoothly whipped the boken up to her shoulder.

"Ughohoh!" Mataro coughed as he landed roughly across the wood separating mat from floor. Satsuki gently pressed her boken's tip against his throat.

"*Very* good. In the end, still not enough, *but* very few people have gotten even that far against me," She said in a clearly impressed tone, low and expressive.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Mataro smiled weakly, and Satsuki felt something light poke her in the ribs. Mataro had lifted his shinai so the tip pointed right at her heart.

"Ah."

"You got careless, right at the end," Mataro wheezed, winded, "It's not a win but -boop-" He gave her a little poke in the middle torso. "There. I hit you. Okay, I'm done now," He let his arms drop, and his weapon fall to ground.

"Not quite, Mataro," Satsuki said, and though her voice wasn't full of the old cold fury it was the same, placid gentleness she'd first greeted him with. There was drive behind it now. "Stand, please."

Mataro got to his feet. Did he dare to hope? Honestly, at this point he didn't care if this was his real final test or not. Even she could not expect anything more of him.

"Mataro, I must tell you I was lying before," Satsuki intoned, "I did not order Uzu to find Diah for you, or plant any surveillance on you. He did that out of the kindness of his heart. And way I found out, well, he noticed when you came out to speak to him that your blindfold was slightly off-kilter. He could see your tan line," She finished, amused.

He chuckled, "Whahahat? You're serious about this?"

"Yes. I know that was a very important evening for you for many reasons, and though I used it I don't want to sully your memory of it. Feel free to ask Uzu to corroborate."

"Ahhh damnit! You really mean if I'd just been more careful I'd've gotten away with it?" He slapped his face, the relief making him laugh despite how angry he'd been. Of course he'd instantly forgiven Satsuki, how couldn't he?

“Not so. In fact, I was going to accuse you no matter if you had removed it or not. Frankly I’m amazed you stuck with it as long as you did. For you see this was your final exam, and you passed. You won’t be needing this any longer.”

There was the faintest gust of wind on Mataro’s face and suddenly he was blinking against the bright morning light. Brilliant colors, the rich earthy tones of the traditionally decorated dojo all around him, silhouetting Satsuki as she smiled, gently lifting the boken as from it dangled the same ratty blindfold he’d been wearing for two years.

He’d never seen the corners of her eyes crinkle like that before. She just looked so genuinely happy that in that moment she wasn’t general, hero, or even a woman of beauty to him. She was just... Satsuki.

Rather than let himself tear up at the thought that this was really happening Mataro stood up straight, hands at his sides and fists clenched.

“Goodness,” Satsuki giggled, “That tan-line really is atrocious!”

“Wha- are you kidding! You’re the last person I’d expect to hear that from!” His composure instantly broke as he sheepishly joined her laughter

“Well, don’t fret, you’ve got all summer to correct it. But first,” She lifted the boken, dropping the blindfold to the ground, and got only slightly more serious. “With the authority granted to me as Supreme Commander of the Japanese military, I hereby grant you a special circumstances promotion. Before today you were my adopted brother, but now you shall be my brother in arms. Mataro Mankanshoku, you are now a member of the Kamui Corps!”

## Chapter End Notes

I really, really like this one. I've been planning it for so goddamn long.

I'm gonna try and shoot out a couple shortish one's like this fairly quick. Next up: "Catching up: Nonon and Rei".

Also I've completely outlined the rest of this part. Considering how I tend to make multi chapter sections for major events I expect this one to wrap up at a total of ~75 chapters.

# Catching up: Nonon and Rei

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May 2067

~~~~~

The beach towns of southern Kyushu were always beautiful at this time of year. Clear skies, picturesque storefronts, rolling seas. Even now with the great seawalls that kept the rising sea level off the buildings and turned them into canal cities and the once crystal clear waters turned murky green by muddy erosion further inland. And even with those storefronts partially blasted apart by a bomb, with the wreck of a life-fiber infused “buzzer” spilling from them. And even with bodies strewn on the streets, mostly REVOCS but a few soldiers and mercifully only a couple citizens. The only new addition to this scene that improved its beauty was the glowing forms of Nonon and Saiban and Rei and Furashada, picking over the damage with the paramedics.

“So, this is what you’ve been up to lately!” Nonon said cheerily as she skipped up to Rei, joining her to walk down the main street to survey the damage, “How’d we do, was that a new record?”

“For time to clear the enemy out? Definitely,” Rei smiled as she answered in her scratchy voice, hoisting her disproportionately huge battleaxe over her shoulder as though it weighed nothing. Nonon meanwhile shrunk *kiba* down to the size of a pencil and used it to pin up her hair. “For collateral damage... eh, not terrible but I’ve done better.”

“Ehehehe sorry about that. I saw that plane thing get too low and I couldn’t resist!”

“Don’t apologize,” Rei chuckled as they laughed along, “Aren’t you supposed to be in charge here?”

“I guess, I guess. It’s just I spent so long with just Uzu and the rest of those goofs, it’s nice to see you!” *And in a much better mood than last time I checked in.*

“Oh! Well thank you,” Rei smiled wide. She did indeed seem to be in a very good mood, she loved the minutia of this work, and more than anything she loved the overjoyed crowds that now came flooding in to survey the damage. They cheered and clapped rhythmically, and she waved to them as cameras flashed around her.

*[I only hope we can broach our difficult topics without spoiling that mood.]* Saiban remarked, and quickly received his reply.

*[Us too, but let’s save it for once our work is done here! Why spoil such a nice day?]* It was Furashada, just as upbeat. His voice, kind and bubbly, laughed along with Rei as a group of children, scrambled up to her squealing, their mothers hot on their heels and full of apologies. Really, it was hard to say it was just his voice. Rei and Furashada had a deeper connection than even the other kamui and their wearers, and not only did she speak for him but he spoke for her too.

*I’m just glad she didn’t immediately get pissed off, Nonon thought, Or start crying, or give me a thousand-yard-stare. This is much better than with those stubborn, traumatized Kiryuins.*

*[There's more to be done?]* Saiban asked.

“Of course, now comes the fun part,” Rei said, patting one of the kids on the head as she swiftly autographed items passed towards her – photographs, action figures, T-shirts with her axe or the scissor blades on them. She even let a toddler in her fathers arms reach out and touch the huge, metallic purple horns that poked through her frizzy hair.

As they observed this, Saiban observed *[Definitely a different kind of worship than they've got down in Indonesia. No priests, no rosary beads. A more personal sort of worship, makes sense]*

*[Au contraire, the only way to stop it from being worship is to make it personal, Make sure they see that we're people too.]*

And just like that Furashada powered down, glowing lace and tusklike spines fading into delicate lavender skirts and shawls. The crowd gasped in amazement and she went right on signing papers. Nonon was a bit more hesitant. In Saiban's flight form, which she'd named “Saiban Kyochuco” (meaning “melody”) she was lighter than air and it was so comfortable they really felt no need to stop .

The crowds of locals and beachgoers were invaded by a much more aggressive group, the Kamui chasing reporters. Camera bulbs flashed and while Nonon wasn't exactly happy to see them she reacted with poise and the press got plentiful shots of her standing proud and regal.

“Lady Nonon Lady Nonon! How is it being back in Japan?” One of the reporters at the front yelled, and Nonon took the opportunity of the brief hush to address them.

She lifted *Kiba* with a fierce flourish and reflexively yelled, “Well, what are you all doing standing around here? It's gonna take a lot to get this place back together, so you might as well get started now! People live here, let's get a move on!”

Shocked and suddenly feeling rather chastened for their profiteering, the reporters took a step back and hesitantly began to file off to help clear the rubble. It was only as the crowds cleared and Nonon noticed the peculiar amused look on Rei's face that she thought maybe that wasn't quite appropriate.

“Hehe, my bad again,” She rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly, “I kinda forgot these are regular people we're surrounded by, not troopers.”

Again Rei smiled, unphased, “Don't worry about it. Did they look too upset? They know your reputation as no-nonsense, know you're the one who destroyed Rosuketsu, I think they'd expect nothing less from you.”

Now that the cameras were momentarily off them they spent a while more talking with the town's residents, accepting their thanks and signing autographs. The atmosphere was so calm and respectful that it was truly strange to Nonon, you'd think there hadn't been a battle moments before. She watched Rei talk with a group of men and women, clustered around an older woman who must have been the mayor or something. They pointed out a bunch of different things in town and the nearby hills that needing fixing or upgrades, described some community problems they were having, and Rei nodded thoughtfully to each issue.

“What was that about, you gonna have the repair crews do some extra work on the side?” Nonon asked. It made sense, if disaster crews were already on hand to clean up the battle, why not use

them for a little unauthorized renovations?

“Not quite. I’ll submit their complaints to the Kiryuin Foundation as charity work, then Ryuko will sign off on it. Better to have someone seeing in person what’s wrong in each community to make better use of the money.”

“Huh. You do that a lot?”

Rei shrugged, “Everywhere I’ve been lately. She hasn’t refused a project once.”

“I’d be shocked if she did,” Nonon laughed.

~~~~~

“So, that’s about my typical day,” Rei said, “What do you think?”

“I see why you like it, that was pretty fun,” Nonon shouted as the engines of the VTOL dropship they were in roared to life and lifted off the ground. They were sitting across from each other, alone in the troop bay. “The part when everyone started clapping in rhythm right as we arrived – holy shit I got chills!”

“I know, right? They started doing that lately. It really terrifies REVOCS, because they do count on ordinary people being scared of them. Like, I *know* what hardened killers they are, and when we arrive moms, kids, grandparents all just decide ‘yeah, we don’t have anything to worry about’.”

“Makes me think now about just *blasting* music right before a battle, and having like the entire army clapping and stomping behind you. Picture that, we pull the battlefleet right up into the harbor of Seoul and just blasting something with huge drums or maybe some rock right at them.”

“Can we do that?” Rei asked enthusiastically. It had already been decided that when the reconquest resumed the offensive with dual pronged strikes at Australia and Korea Rei would be accompanying Nonon to Korea.

“Oh, now we’re definitely going to do that. What’s your favorite kind of music, by the way? I never asked.”

“I don’t normally tell people this, and don’t freak out, but I do mostly like orchestral music and, uh, I guess stuff from other genres that sounds like orchestral?” Rei answered a bit shyly.

“Ah, I knew there was a reason I liked you!” Nonon exclaimed jokingly. “Gosh, that is great though. I realized just recently I didn’t even know that, I don’t think I know that about most of our friends and obviously I want to.”

*[Oh, she just wants to know so she can show up how Ryuko makes clothes for people with making songs for them,]* Saiban said snidely.

“It would make a pretty amazing Christmas present, can’t argue with that,” Rei chuckled. “You know though it is kind of intimidating to talk about music to someone whose such an expert on music.”

“Oh, sure, sure. God, y’know I’ve never even written any music for Uzu, isn’t that terrible of me?”

“I think if you were ever that nice to him his jaw would drop so hard they’d have to surgically reattach it,” Rei joked back, and Nonon laughed along with her.

As he laughter died down Nonon quickly said, “Ohh, I’m plenty nice to him. Back on topic though, it does make me feel kind of bad, taking you from this. You seem to really like it.”

“Yeah, I do, but-” Rei abruptly stopped herself, grimacing, “Oh, look at this now.”

They were zooming over a town where a large new billboard was mounted onto a skyscraper, the largest building. Ryuko was on it, hair blazing red, diaphanous wings drifting behind her.

“Oh boy. I-I’m sorry, we could’ve rerouted around major towns if I’d known-”

“-Hold on. We haven’t seen this one yet,” Rei said, listening intently. The speech Ryuko was giving could be heard fairly well through the dropship, and there were crowds down below watching.

~ “I’ve always said that when I stepped up to save the world I was only doing what anyone else would have done in my place. I believe, I will always believe that each and every one of you could have filled my place if the turns of fate had been different, it’s just that I **am** the one who ended up here. And so I promise you that if you choose me to be your queen, your protector, that I will only do what any of you would do in that situation, good people. So please, vote as your heart tells you. Thank you, I love you all,” ~ Ryuko intoned, doing her best to not sound like someone reading off a teleprompter. Not like she didn’t feel those words, she just wasn’t used to pre-writing speeches.

“Now that, I don’t like.”

Nonon grunted halfheartedly and said, “Good speech though, I guess.”

*[Bet **Satsuki** wrote it for her,]* Furashada grumped.

“You know,” Rei said, “If this was Satsuki’s idea, I think it would be grounds for me to cash in that old promise she made and shoot her. You remember that, don’t you.”

*[Rei, come on.]* Furashada said making it clear it was just him. *[I just want you guys to know that’s one thing we **don’t** agree on!]*

“Furashada!” Rei sounded a little hurt, “I didn’t *really* mean it!”

Nonon sighed as Saiban said, *[If that’s your way of asking if it really was us who proposed it, well I hate to tell you this but it was.]*

“Yeah, I wouldn’t believe me if I were saying it either, but this one’s on us. I’d never *let* her put my name on something like that, I wouldn’t be proposing it at all if the situation hadn’t forced my hand.”

“And let me guess, she’s actually the one most strongly opposed to the whole thing? Y’know I guess I am kind of glad you got me to skip that meeting,” Rei didn’t look too pleased by that.

Nonon sighed, “It must burn you for her to be on the same side as you on this. You can vent about it to me if you want, you know that right?”

“Oh no, no I wouldn’t want to,” Rei shook her head, “I mean, it was rough at first, sure, but we’re doing alright now.”



“ Please, you were just talking about killing her, it’s not *all* alright.”

*[Nonon doesn’t want to sound like HR, so I’ll do it. Fact is you’re one of us, you’re in the team, and they aren’t. It’s not just about making sure you’ll be effective in battle, what kind of leader would she be if she didn’t make sure you were alright?] Saiban said.*

“Yeah, what he said. Look, I might not be on your side with this one little political issue but in this I’m completely on your side. I mean, Satsuki’s still gonna be a part of my life but we’re really not friends anymore and she fucked up on this one, no question.”

Rei made a pleasantly surprised “Hmm” and said, “ Alright fine! She’s a fucking… bitch is what she is!” She burst as though it had literally been bottled up (even calling Satsuki a bitch would be so unpatriotic to most people it just felt wrong to do it) , “ She has all the money in the world, second most famous name in the world, and that’s still not good enough? She has to steal *my* girlfriend? Her sister? I-I mean how can you *be* that woman?”

“ Hell yeah, that’s right!” Nonon grinned. This didn’t feel like the ragings of someone who was going to try to kill Satsuki or themselves or who might burst into tears at any moment. This was cathartic, the right way to handle the situation. *She’s spent a lot longer than either Ryuko or Satsuki that she might have her own mental health to watch out for, it’s not surprising.*

“ Always so smug and self-assured like the sunshine flows out her ass! I mean you’ve known her better, she’s always been like that, right?”

“Oh yeah, but thing is that’s mostly an act, underneath she’s a nervous wreck just like everyone else.”

“Good! I hope so!” Rei gestured emphatically with a pointed finger jammed into the seat next to her, “But you know what the worst part is is that remember how she made that promise that if she ever did anything objectionable I could kill her? Well, not only can I not do it because obviously just her saying it’s okay wouldn’t mean anyone else would forgive me, but I really just *can’t do it*. Even in spite of everything I don’t want to because she’s right!” Nonon’s eyebrows rose so she qualified, “ Personally, obviously not. But her economics, her politics, I mean we’re not just on the same side on this queen thing we’re on the same side on *everything*! So what the fuck am I even supposed to do if she acts like she always knows best but usually she does! It’s seriously unbelievable how someone can be so educated and so right-thinking when it comes to what’s best for society and still just so awful! I mean, what would you do if someone stole Uzu from you?”

Reflexively Nonon said, “Oh, she’d be dead!” Which surprised her, but she wasn’t going to back down from it much, “Well, maybe not literally murder, but some horrible revenge for sure!”

“Right, but how’s that supposed to go when Satsuki is the reason I’m even alive right now in the first place! And definitely if she hadn’t talked me down I wouldn’t be here, I wouldn’t have Furashada, I wouldn’t know all of you! So what am I supposed to do? It’s so fucking infuriating I just want to explode sometimes!” Rei finished yelling. Nonon didn’t think she’d ever heard her so loud, but after a bit of heavy, furious breathing she calmed down and started laughing. “Phew! Oh, that felt *good* !”

“ Tell me about it,” Nonon was genuinely relieved and entertained. She expected to be walking into another den of trauma and tears but this was just regular old anger. She felt like maybe Rei would eventually get over this all, and that would be best for her.

“ To tell the truth I do think I played this all wrong. Like, when Ryuko first told me, or I guess I confronted her on it I thought obviously that she had just been using me to cover for her *real* relationship, so obviously I left right away because I mean how could I just-”

“-No, pride, I get it totally.”

“Right, but after like weeks wore on I realized that wasn’t really it and that if I wanted to help Ryuko get over this I should’ve stayed. She was guilty about it then, she *was* . But now I guess not. Satsuki totally outmaneuvered me there, and I tried to get back in with her once or twice.”

“ Yeah, I heard about it. Apparently Ryuko was really fucked up about the whole thing.”

“Oh, she was. I don’t know quite what it was that I did wrong but that was a bad idea. But what was I supposed to do, let Satsuki win? I mean, she did win in the end – for now - but how could I not try to fight back? ”

“Win? I mean, fuck Ryuko too honestly. Not much of prize, might as well just let Satsuki have ‘er.”

That made Rei frown and furrow her brow, “No. No, no you just don’t know Ryuko like I do. She’s great, really, like I know exactly why she drew Satsuki in too. You only know her from the outside, and don’t try to give me a ‘plenty of fish’ speech. I appreciate everything else, giving me this time to vent, but there’s only one Ryuko.”

“Oh please, she was an average girlfriend at best to you, and a rotten friend to me so I really don’t see what’s so great about her. Believe me, she’s just as dysfunctional as Satsuki, they deserve each other they really do.”

“Average!” Rei gasped.

“ Yeah, I mean I know, I can see how she can be charming and fun even if I don’t get it,” (though in all honesty Nonon did get it), “But you guys fought, like a lot. If you did have more dating experience you’d see that wasn’t very normal. Besides, you maybe didn’t hear this but Houka told me that on the day at the Australia Debacle when they went official something really fuckin’ insane happened to Ryuko just before. Like, she accidentally opened a portal between different dimensions insane.”

That stopped Rei dead in her tracks, “What? No, that can’t be right.”

“Yeah. Like, she got flung into the home dimension of the life-fibers for a bit and had to claw her way back. Saiban got to see a little of it, it’s like nothing else. They say, she said, that Senketsu is alive there.”

“What!”

“Look, I don’t know, read the report. My point is that before that she wouldn’t go public with Satsuki, afterward she said she had to re-prioritize things. I have no idea what she saw on the other side, but you may not know her as well as you think *now* .”

Rei considered that for a moment before finally saying, “I believe that when I see it. Maybe, maybe. But you’re wrong about her. She’s not like Satsuki she’s a good person. Thank you though, even if we don’t see eye to eye on that it’s been nice to get that all out.”

“Of course, no problem.” *Well, we’ll work on the Ryuko thing later. No rush.* “So, if you don’t mind me asking, if you’re not trying to win her back anymore what’s your plan?”

“Oh, I’m not really sure I have one.”

*[Oh geez,]* Saiban grumbled.

“I’m just taking each day as it comes. But I can’t really complain,” She said, looking out over the rolling hills and towns and the ocean beyond that. “This job really helps. To be out here helping people every day, really makes my problems feel very small. And it gives me an honest-to-god chance to redeem myself, because it’s all of *them* who I really wronged, not just Ryuko.”

Nonon nodded, “I think we can deliver that for you on the mainland, I think you’ll like it. The amount of lives we saved in Indonesia – in some place more urban it’s gonna be just staggeringly more.”

“I’ll at least give it a try, maybe I will find that I like this more but who knows?”

“That’s the spirit!” Nonon said cheerily, and that kind of closed out the conversation. They were all quite relieved – this had gone better than expected.

“Hey,” Rei said after a bit, “You know what made me really happy was before when you said ‘our friends’.”

“Of course!”

“Because I was worried that maybe if I didn’t have Ryuko, that you’d all take her side and I’d be an outsider again.”

“Aww, no way! *That* isn’t how we roll. I mean, look how much leeway everyone’s been giving Ryuko and Satsuki and you think they’d ever dream of abandoning you? For better or worse we stick together like glue, and you’re in now. So don’t go saying sad stuff like that.”

Rei laughed, “Thank you though. Really.”

“Really. Don’t sweat it. But hey, y’know before we head out we really oughta get drinks one of these nights. Girls night out! Girls and their Kamui night out, that is. Oh! Bring Aoi along too, right?” Nonon hadn’t really had experience with it, but she knew Aoi and Rei were very close friends especially since Tsumugu had left for Indonesia. And now that he was back and his mood seemed much improved no doubt it was rubbing off on his wife too.

“Ohh, that sounds lovely!” Rei was overjoyed just to be asked. “Only, it’ll have to be without the drinks for me. I’ve given it up, bad habit.”

Nonon chuckled, “Damn, you just might have a stronger will than any of us.”

I like to track character's general mental well being with a sort of imaginary "mood bar" that fills up more depending how good their doing. And I think Rei's at the point where her "mood bar" is slowly but surely recovering. Will it continue to rise or will it fall? Who can say?

I won't be able to fire off the next one quite so fast but rest assured it's gonna be a banger. Or might try to slip in a very quick convo between Ryuko and Senketsu if I find the time.

# Lakeside consultation

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

They were sitting on the edge of a lake. The grass beneath their feet was unbelievably green, the water unbelievably blue, and the smooth stones of the shore pristine purple-grey and rounded. Rich pines grew up behind them and all around the rolling hills that lifted from the distant shores, first standing alone but then clumping together until together they made an impenetrable forest. In the distance, the trees grew taller and taller still, first the height of redwoods, then skyscrapers, and soon they blended in with the jagged black mountains beyond, all rough and unnatural and making the normal sized trees that lined the lake's smooth inlets look like toothpicks.

But behind those mountains, behind even the blue tint of atmosphere that framed this isolated landscape in perfect, cloudless sky, there rose the rest of everything. Bio-luminescent tendrils and appendages with technicolor spires and eyes woven into their very being, fleshy membranes casting light into space. Incomprehensibly large and distant, craning up around them like architecture, a living cathedral. And that wasn't even the end of it. Beyond, the radial wings around Ryuko's body, the slowly rotating spheroid of earth, the distant stars. And behind even that drifted the endless, lace-like veil of the life-fiber network, and the wall of living... something that it was hiding, guarding.

There were things about her newfound ability to shrug off her human body and exist in her true body that Ryuko had gotten used to quickly. The tearing away of many hundreds of independant trains of thought, the real-seeming nature of things she imagined, seeing short stretches back and forth in time. But the ever-present, looming existence of The Thing Behind the Veil was not one of them. Even the infinite night of space seemed confined by it, so large and omnipresent that of course it didn't even care that it had nearly eradicated everything she'd ever known. Even Saiban absorbing Rosuketsu – a massive loss to REVOCS - did not seem to register to it. The life-fibers themselves were just a tool to it, how much lesser than that were it's human slaves? It was a constant reminder that they were up against an enemy that couldn't be dissuaded, could never see value in leaving Earth alive, and was infinitely stronger than she was.

It had to be a cruel joke. It couldn't really be that the entire universe wanted her dead – if it even noticed her – right?

Fortunately though, she had things to distract herself.

“Could you *try* to hold still?”

*I am trying!*

“That's not even your real body, this is all imaginary, and you're still fidgeting. Why don't I believe that?”

Senketsu growled, *Just because it's not real doesn't mean it doesn't tickle **like** it's real.*

“Well then just remove the nerve endings in your face or something!”

*Oh, well if it's that easy why don't you try fixing your crosseye?* He shot back.

“What! I don't have a crosseye, shut up!” Ryuko tossed down her chisel and crossed her arms with a huff.

*Alright then here. Look at me,* Senketsu said, and Ryuko complied, *Now smile.* She did that too, although mostly because she was looking at a half-finished face in the process of being carved from the black obsidianlike material Senketsu had made his human likeness out of. *Yeah. Now do the same thing to the water.*

Ryuko leaned out over her knees, where her feet dangled from the edge of the wide slate slab they were sitting on. She smiled at her reflection in the water and sure it was slight, only obvious if you looked at her straight on, but-

“What in the – how'd I never notice that?” She exclaimed, popping back up and giving Senketsu a little punch on the shoulder for not telling her sooner.

*You don't smile at yourself in the mirror enough,* Senketsu said tenderly.

Ryuko picked her tools back up and hummed in response. As promised, the time had come to give Senketsu's human likeness a face. It wasn't really like he needed one, and it wasn't like Ryuko needed to make it by hand. Once, Ryuko had daydreamed in class at Honnouji and Senketsu had joined in, creating a shared imagining that went beyond words. Now, the only thing that had changed was that their daydreams had three dimensions, and if they would have looked and felt real to a human that was only proof how much greater their true forms were. Here, she could have made that face instantly, without lifting a finger. But this was also their place, where everything could be exactly as they wanted it. So Ryuko was going to make that face as though sculpting a renaissance masterwork, because it had to be perfect.

Arrayed next to her were her models: busts of her own head, Satsuki's, and of course their father's head (before his facial reconstruction). It was only fitting, she thought, to make sure there was a family resemblance. She'd already reshaped his chin and beard (they'd been fine but she'd made them even better) then moved on to creating mouth and lips (she'd started by putting them in a mild neutral pose but no, they hadn't come out expressive enough, so she'd settled instead for a slight, smug smile) and then the cheeks (cheekbones prominent, but not gaunt, she'd thought his first body had looked a little underweight too and encouraged him to add some muscle below the neck). It was really coming together, even to her it was amazing how stone could take on the softness of skin. And now they were onto the brow and eyes. Making sure they could furrow in appropriately thunderous rage but yet soften to gentleness.

*So,* he said, picking up their previous conversation, *what do you want out of it?*

Ryuko sighed, “You know I don't know that. How am I supposed to want anything out of being a ‘world leader’?”

*Mostly it is simply a responsibility, you're right. I think we both know that for you this kind of responsibility will always be there whether you want it or not.* To overthrow Honnouji. To save the world from Ragyo. To patrol the city streets and help people with her powers. To give life to her kamui. To keep defending Earth against the life-fibers. And now this.

*But consider this. The responsibility to step in when all else has failed will always exist for you, so long as you're the only one who can. Doesn't matter what honorifics and titles they give you.*

*That's not what the people who proposed this – not Nonon, whoever suggested it to her – that's not what they were trying to give you. They're saying, I believe, that they consider you so important that it's alright if you're elevated above other people. That what you want gets precedence even when it affects society. And I think that's a fair trade for all the responsibility that you and only you have.*

“Pssh!” Ryuko scoffed, “Maybe Nonon and Saiban are strong enough now that they can actually handle everything, ever think of that? I mean, all my kamui could definitely beat me at full strength if they teamed up.”

*Ryuko, please, we can both see them.* It was true, she could see their radial, astral forms orbiting Earth in the middle distance, just like she was. *None of them have reached your level yet.*

“Ah, but still,” Ryuko remained dismissive, “What I want, please. Y’know what I’d like, is for everyone to get to the point where they’re cool with Sats and I and not just because they have to be. That, and maybe somehow if Rei didn’t hate me anymore. I mean, she didn’t hate me when she first found out, but now she’ll never speak to me again I’m sure of that. So how the hell is being Queen, which not a single one of them wants, supposed to help me with that?”

Senketsu certainly understood the argument. His shoulders slumped a little, but Ryuko quickly put a hand between them and straightened him back out. There was no room for him to doubt, those were Ryuko’s more ardent desires he could feel that.

And yet at the same time he felt past her lingering self-deception to the slowly growing acceptance that this was going to happen, no matter what she would receive a title be it “queen” or “first citizen” or whatever. As the day of the fateful vote came closer it wasn’t hard to tell which way the body politic was swinging. And that meant all that mattered to him was that he help her make the best of it. Well, she wasn’t making his job easy.

*Maybe being thrust into this unusual situation make you all closer. It’ll be a change you’ll all have to deal with.*

“Yeah, or...” Ryuko trailed off, the glass surface of the lake shimmering and shifting. A vision of high towers adorned with turrets and artillery, an industrial hell like Honnouji. Ira watching the troops march past with his old iron frown, eyes furiously watching for any imperfection. Nonon and Uzu leading them, taking sadistic joy in the bloodshed, uncaring about collateral damage or anything really except killing. Houka and Shiro, somewhere, the spiders hidden in the walls, their perfect surveillance system now turned to ironing out all nonconformity. And there she was at the top of the highest tower, sitting aggrieved on a throne as stony and uncomfortable as the entire military machine spread out before her. And worst of all there next to the throne was Satsuki, scowl back, the old monster let loose again. Ryuko had no illusions that Satsuki did enjoy power, no matter if it was wrong. That was part of what made her so dangerously alluring. But yet, to let her have what she yearned like that... She could corrupt them all back to the way they used to be.

*You know that would **never** happen.* Senketsu said, *But yet, you don’t want to give it the chance.*

“I mean, I don’t really think *that* would happen. But you know what I mean.”

*That the power, or not really the power because you all already have that, but the eyes of the world on you will change them. Change you too maybe.*

“If Sats likes it, and Ragyo did, then maybe I would too,” Ryuko said darkly. She wasn’t afraid anymore that Ragyo might be taking her over from the inside, but that didn’t help her if she might still be more like her mother than she liked. She *needed* to get into Ragyo’s memories, to see what made her into a monster. If she’d always been like that, or if once she’d been something like normal. But she couldn’t bring herself to do it yet.

Senketsu chuckled, *What, you really think you’re just waiting for your ‘Ragyo moment’ when it all goes to your head? They didn’t care if they were feared or loved.*

“No, it’s more than that. Like, Sats must feel good in front of a crowd, right? But I always feel... scared, I guess. It’s like they expect something from me, and they know what it is. It’s like what Nonon said, they’re waiting for me to give them some message, something to believe in.”

*And you don’t think you have anything? Why isn’t the truth enough?*

“I just... don’t think that’s what they’re looking for. Sure it’s like, it’s the life-fibers against us, maybe that means people should stop fighting each other and unite so we can focus on our real enemy. But that’s not what they want, they want to know how to live their regular lives, right?”

Senketsu didn’t really have an answer for that. If he did have an idea, she’d be the first to know. But Ryuko knew a lot more about living as a human than he did, he’d spent so little time on Earth the whole thing still was a strange to him. Finally, he asked, *Why do you feel the need to spell everything out? Words have never been your strong suit. When you returned at the engagement ball, I don’t think anyone missed the point.*

Ryuko smiled, remembering that. There’d never been a moment before when she’d felt so rejuvenated, so much clarity. Who cared what everyone else thought when she was Satsuki’s hope and REVOCS’ greatest fear?

The idea was still scary to Ryuko though. “Right, like I’m such a great example. I never even graduated college!”

*Ryuko, Senketsu sighed, How many of the famous people in history made it through the university system that your country has at this moment? Very few, probably none, actually. That’s what I thought.*

“But that’s not the point! I’m sure they could have. So what can I do if I’m not capable of even that?” There it was, the real heart of it. Whether it was because she would corrupt her family or be corrupted or because she just plain wasn’t good enough to fill the role. She didn’t deserve this.

*Ryuko... That one word said everything. He never wanted to hear her say that again.*

Ryuko shook her head. “I don’t know, I don’t know. This is all driving me crazy. I keep trying to even picture what it will be like, and it just makes my head feel like it’s going to explode. You always hear everyone dreams of ruling the world but that’s only because they don’t actually have the chance to! I mean, honestly, what do you think my practical, regular-old job will be as queen?”

*Well, that’s for you to decide. That’s what I meant before, your wants get to take priority. You think you have no choice, but that’s only because you’re not looking at it the right way. What was it you said – You’ve been thinking for years that you have all these powers, why don’t they*



*make anything work out better for? But really what needed to change was your attitude – remember that? This is just another power, another thing you’ve been stuck with. Make it work for you.*

“I can’t live a normal life, that’s just not me,” Ryuko parroted back the words she’d said to Satsuki on the beach. He had a point. No sense letting this whole thing drive her mad when she could make it work for her. Y’know what had driven her mad? Getting disconnected from her human body, being thrust into the cosmos with no warning. And now here she was, keeping it all together. Okay, what was a pretty hat and a few “your majesties” compared to that? Senketsu wasn’t scared, he wasn’t driven crazy by it.

*Exactly. But... if you really need help picturing it, well we have all the time we need here to do just that.* As he spoke the ground faintly trembled and beside them, smoothly sliding from the ground was the lake house when Ryuko and Satsuki had spent their weekend together, bigger and better than ever. Paper lanterns around the gardens and porches, rooms open to the breeze, all the gaudy gilding replaced with simple, homey décor that was somehow far more inviting. And more mysterious - what went on in there, it seemed to call them to come inside and find out. A buzz of life, people always coming and going. The kind of home he knew Ryuko would think looked fit for a queen, but yet a queen who had never forgotten that she was still Ryuko. *The face can wait.*

~~~~~

June 2067

~~~~~

Ryuko slid the backyard door of the garden cottage shut with visions of the future she and Senketsu had dreamed up still dancing in her head. Satsuki looked up from her book, a secure, contented smile resting naturally on her lips.

“Welcome back to Earth, dear,” She quipped, “You didn’t rush back on my account, I hope.”

“Hey Sats?” Ryuko asked, leaning over the back of her armchair and pressing her cheek right up on Satsuki’s head, “Do I have a crosseye? Just a teeny-tiny bit of one?”

“Oh. You do indeed, I always though you knew. I think it’s adorable.”

*Adorable.* The word gave Ryuko such a leap in her chest even after hearing it plenty that she couldn’t contain herself and vaulted clean over the chair. She whisked the book out of Satsuki’s hands and dropped into her lap instead. It was in her inhuman capabilities to land light as a feather, but she let her heavy self flop. It was nice to feel how Satsuki’s muscles tensed to absorb the hit without any more break in composure than a little “oof”. Almost as nice as how her arms wrapped around her and squeezed her as if checking to make sure she was real.

“Hey, y’know I was thinking we should do that trip down to Indonesia that Aikuro suggested,” Ryuko said between kisses to Satsuki’s neck, and in response to raised eyebrows explained, “How can I call myself their queen if I’ve never even seen them?”

She didn’t really need to say anything else. Satsuki was more than used to adjusting to new realities. Ryuko seemed happy right now, very happy. And with the world being what it was and the future so unpredictable that was enough for now. *Thank you, Senketsu. I hope one day I get to see you again, just so I can tell you in person.*

“I hope you didn’t lose my page, or I’ll be quite cross,” Satsuki said.

Ryuko grinned, “Cross, huh? I’d like to see you try and get ‘cross’ with me.” Below her the book clunkily hit the floor.

And then Ryuko hit the floor as Satsuki playfully shoved her, then pounced on her. After a moment of giggly “wrestling” Ryuko conceded that she was effectively pinned and ceased struggling so Satsuki could kiss her.

“Dya think if everyone could see how happy we are right now they’d forgive us right then and there?”

“Mmm. In a better world, maybe.”

“Then we’ll just have to be even happier, won’t we?”

# I want to know

## Chapter Summary

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7HXX-ED0\\_0&list=PLRFrhOFPR7sOSdAmJIIPP3kcFAjcVPgAT&index=4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7HXX-ED0_0&list=PLRFrhOFPR7sOSdAmJIIPP3kcFAjcVPgAT&index=4)

Yeah, if you wanna put this on while you read that'd be about right.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

June 2067

“Stop right there, polluted one!” A strident, high pitched girl’s voice brought Nonon to a halt, hovering over the rubble of what was once downtown Seoul. Though the battle raged all around, planes dogfighting above her, artillery and ultima uniforms below, Saiban instantly picked out who was speaking. Flanking them on either side, two alien creatures hosted in the bodies of redheaded teenage girls: the Kamui Sumiretsu and Yuriketsu.

Nonon smirked, “So, how about that, I guess we finally rate paying attention to now that we’ve killed one of your buddies! Two of you though? Don’t you think that’s a little overkill?”

“Silence, human!” Sumiretsu huffed again, a bratty sneer plastered on its human’s face, “Your very existence offends us!” The kamui’s powered up form was made of silvery, metallic armor with purple finish, a tight breastplate confining her chest but open across the belly, with its eyes poking out from the tops of flattened, squarish epaulettes that bore a vague resemblance to football shoulderpads. It made its eyes look like they were perpetually furrowed in irritation. It was a streamlined, precise looking kamui and it’s host hands bore two long, thin stilettos.

“What, you really think I’d let you hunt her all alone? We’re two-in-one, you dowdy old hag! Didn’t anyone tell you snakeskin is so last season?” Yuriketsu chimed in, face stuck in a facsimile of a grin, twirling its halberd absently.

*[Oh, it calls **me** out of style when it looks like something from the 18<sup>th</sup> century!]* Saiban scoffed, not at all inaccurate considering the glittery corset that pushed up its host’s breasts in a way that wouldn’t have been out of place in the ballrooms of old Europe.

“Yeah right, a two-in-one pain in my ass!” Nonon scoffed, “Get off my dick, bitch!”

From the distance, a rough bark of laughter broke through the smoke and rubble. “Just as sharp as ever, my serpentine friend!” Houka shouted as he emerged, sailing through the air to perch casual as anything on the bashed open shell of a half-fallen tower. “Only, I think we’ve got something to match that package deal.”

On the other side of Nonon, a second shadow leapt up on the flanks, short and thin body wrapped in burgundy red held up by eight prehensile arms. A flash of blonde hair waved over a tinted visor

as Shiro latched between two buildings. “Hey Nonon, I’m here too!” He called, not seeming too impressed by the alien monsters in front of him.

“See, now there’s a two-in-one deal I can get behind!” Nonon grinned, then addressed Yuriketsu, “Well you’re too late anyway. You can see I don’t hunt alone.” She gestured expansively across the battlefield, where the bronzey-gold light from Ira and Tekketsu and the burning white-lavender light from Reiketsu also glowed. “Oh, and since I doubt you can count that high, there’s only five of us here. And wasn’t one of you supposed to be watching over your Australian army?” There was just a brief moment when the fabricated sneer and grin on the kamui’s faces faltered. Nonon announced confidently, “You played yourselves. Now there’s nobody there to stop my boyfriend and his buddies from running your cronies over there into the ocean!”

The sneer was back on Sumiretsu’s face, “That’s cute. But you’ll never see him again.” And it snapped its fingers dramatically.

There was a dull roaring from the ground behind Nonon, and her heart sunk. The obelisk. She turned slowly to see the deep underground engines roar to life.

“Ohhh *shit!*”

“No! There’s no way it can be fully operational!” Shiro shouted, wheeling around and leaping over to watch, aghast.

And Houka replied, “No duh it’s not finished, it’ll explode itself just like the other ones did! Doesn’t mean it won’t get the job done!”

“Focus guys! We got a task at hand!” Nonon turned to the enemy kamui with fury in her eyes, and Saiban’s too. Fuck this, a hundred thousand more people might die today but these monsters would be *hers*. “Ira! Rei!” She barked into her earpiece, “Get the evacuation going, double time! This place is gonna blow!”

~“*WHAT! NOT WHILE I’M STILL STANDING IT’S NOT!*”~ Ira roared so loud Nonon recoiled. All at once he wheeled around, charging right into the enemy ranks with full force. Hordes of Ultima troopers, squadrons of mechs, even some Two- and Three-Star commanders leapt up to try and intercept him, but with the speed and brutality only a kamui could muster he swung his Nodachi in broad arcs as he rushed forward, creating huge shockwaves that carved right through the army as Tekketsu shot blasts of fire to pick off stragglers.

As the rumbling grew even louder, Nonon saw Ira fling himself over the edge of the obelisk pit and drop down to stand amidst the bodies of the enslaved people who were sacrificed to it. ~“*OH! GOD! They didn’t warn us about this Tekketsu, did they?*”~

“Ira you stupid bastard what the fuck do you think you’re doing!” Nonon shouted

~ “*No! He knows what he’s doing,*” ~ Rei said insistently, ~ “*We can’t allow another Krakatoa, we just **can’t**.*” ~

Ira coughed a bit and cleared his throat before he got over the stench, face set with determination, ~ “*THESE THINGS MAY BE CAPABLE OF CRACKING THE ROCKS OF THE EARTH, BUT WE’LL SEE IF IT CAN WITHSTAND MY **IRON FIST!***” ~

The roaring peaked. Fast as light itself the great lead core of the obelisk slammed down and everything froze as... nothing.

Nothing but a blinding flash of bronze colored light and a roaring laugh as the obelisk groaned and started to go *back up*.

***“AHAAAAAAAAAAAA!”***

There was something huge clutching the edge of the lead core. No, five things. Fingers.

Nonon was utterly shocked, “Ho-lee *shit*! Oho my God Ira I’m sorry I ever doubted you!”

Houka rubbed his eyes, “I-I know I’ve got supersenses but... this can’t be right. Because it looks like the big guy-,”

“-No, not him. Tekkesu evolved a new form, looks like,” Shiro chuckled, “And it is a beaut!”

Taller than the skyscrapers. Brutal, shining grey, metal and stone, stretching into the sky like a thundercloud. Every muscle defined by lines of light, every hair on his head shining like gold. His eyes, not the white, grey and black of a human but bright inferno orange. Eyes for both him and Tekketsu to see through on a stone face as vast as a football field. A face that parted with an unhinged, triumphant smile. It wasn’t a perfect replication of Ira, more a stylized impression of him, even more musclebound, almost cartoonish (and, mercifully, the skintight armored shorts Tekketsu’s standard powered-up form had). Maybe an impression of Tekketsu’s image of him, of them.

***“WE ARE KAMUI TEKKETSU AND IRA GAMAGORI!”*** They bellowed, Ira’s voice but resonant and booming as though from the largest megaphone ever made. ***“YOU WILL NOT CLAIM THE ANOTHER LIFE WHILE WE STAND!”***

Even Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu were frozen in shock. What were they supposed to do? The obelisk kept on lifting up as Ira straightened up to standing, and then slow as anything the central core groaned, tipped, and slammed down onto the occupied portion of the city, crushing abandoned buildings and REVOCS fortifications in a wall of dust that spread all the way across the cityscape. Without hesitation he *stepped* out of the pit, bending aside the spare spires still standing. Even the largest mechs barely came up to his knee. His knee, or the knee of this gargantuan new creature?

Even Houka and Shiro would struggle to answer exactly what the hell this new form was. The material, clearly living, but obviously not part of Ira. Part of Tekketsu? Maybe, but compositionally different from any other kamui and not 100% life-fiber. Some kind of living stone, infused with her life-fibers, but where had it come from? Where had his physical body gone? It was a mystery, but what to call this new form?

The REVOCS forces had been bearing down on the harbor, where the reconquest beachhead was desperately holding out as the surviving citizens were loaded onto boats. But now they ran in utter terror as Ira shouted, ***“THIS IS TEKKETSU, KYOJIN FORM! AHAHAHAHAHAHA!”***

~~~~~

July 2067

~~~~~

“I’m telling you, it was like nothing else!” Nonon gushed, “Oh, the news footage just doesn’t do it justice! Uzu will *never* let me off the hook I sent him to Australia and he couldn’t see ‘em get their new form!”

From her seat on Nonon’s plush white couch, Satsuki smiled, “But yet, him and the rest of your merry band cleaned the entire island continent out in just a few weeks, I’m sure he’s happy about *that*.”

“Ugh, meanwhile I’m stuck with mountains on cities on forests and *two* kamui – not like that wasn’t the plan though – and besides that the rest of the crew have to get brought up to speed with this whole warfare thing,” Nonon sighed, rubbing her temples. “It’s lucky I even got the time to come back this weekend for R n’ R – buuut enough about me, we’re burning daylight. Ryuko’ll be back any second.”

It was true, this little meeting in Nonon’s penthouse had required not just coordination for the others on the mainland to pick up Nonon’s slack but also for Mako to persuade Ryuko to take just a few hours off Satsuki guard-duty for lunch and a mall trip. Mako was looking for boots to replace the ones that she’d accidentally soaked in the rain (with Ira away she had nobody to remind her they weren’t waterproof) and Ryuko wanted to look in the designer boutiques for new ideas and such. It wasn’t just Ryuko who hadn’t been happy about leaving Satsuki, even Nonon felt a little antsy about it.

Now that they had the upper hand on REVOCS, the already present threat of assassination increased even further. The pressure to demoralize the Kamui Corps was so strong that they’d even had a couple failed attempts on Mako’s life. But eventually, they all managed to convince each other that if she wasn’t gonna be under the watch of the strongest being in the world, the second strongest would probably be fine.

Nonon sat down at the piano and began to play. It had been a long time coming, months since Satsuki first sent her the rudiments of this song, this... mental byproduct of Junketsu’s attempts to break her will. She prodded it out with gentle, masterful strokes, softly tapping each chord in a smooth, melodic succession. The song, even though Nonon had written it, wasn’t what she’d expected it to be. Soulful, somber, it made one feel that they’d lost something, something precious. And that was a very human feeling, something totally in line with the long tradition of music. Not at all alien sounding, nothing about it sounded like there was some secret here, something that broke the mind and bent it to Junketsu’s will. And yet Saiban knew that’s what it was supposed to be.

*Oh God, I’ve butchered it,* Nonon thought, until she saw Satsuki’s face.

She didn’t stop playing, but if it wasn’t such muscle memory she might have from sheer shock. Satsuki was stretched out across the couch, fingers laced over her belly, staring off into space with a look that might’ve belonged on ordinary people, but not Satsuki Kiryuin. That look, that sad, wistful look. Chin weak and quivery, eyes glassy, but not breaking down in tears just... almost relieved, actually. Nonon had *never* seen that look on Satsuki’s face.

*I always thought Satsuki liked wearing Junketsu in a thrill-seeking way. Sort of the savage joy of mastering it, like bullfighting or skydiving just way, way more intense,* Nonon reflected as she played, observed Satsuki with agitated curiosity. Her foot tapped anxiously. *I see now that’s not it at all. But... I have to believe it when Saiban said no human could resist Junketsu – how could we when they manipulated our evolution? So how could she enjoy it? How could she*

*stay herself?* Curiosity was definitely the right word, almost morbid curiosity. She knew about what Ragyo had done to Satsuki – not like she’d ever spoken about it, but Nonon knew – and obviously that was traumatizing Nonon had long since realized that. But now she was learning that was only scratching the surface of the damage. Did Satsuki think she’d been sparing Nonon from the true horror? Had she actually been? The questions overwhelmed her sympathy, honestly.

Well, mostly. There was something shocking about seeing Satsuki like this, in this kind of meditative state of sublime... something. *Look at us. I can't believe I never noticed, no fuck that, I can't believe she never told me! I mean, why does it have to take **Ryuko** of all fucking people for her to finally open up? I was always there! Hell, if she'd just decided to talk to me for once we might not even be in this situation!* The thought enraged Nonon for all the same reasons she’d slapped Satsuki that first time.

Satsuki didn’t have any idea about that tumult of jealousy and helpless anger though. She just sort of glanced at Nonon, a lost look on her face. All the drive and steel was gone from her eyes, and that irritated Nonon too. What the fuck did this all mean?

*I can't tell, there's really no answer why this has this effect on her. But is this what I wanted all along? For Satsuki to show me just how much her own mind has been fucked by dealing with Junketsu?*

“I-Is this what you expected?” She asked hesitantly, dropping the volume just slightly.

“Oh, yes, you’ve done a wonderful job. This is *exactly* how I envisioned it. Thank you, I know you might not want to do this,” Satsuki nodded, and in that moment Nonon and Saiban were both sure. Maybe she had resisted Junketsu, maybe she’d found some way to bend with it, embrace it without breaking. It didn’t matter because what they were doing wasn’t about that, it was about reliving something. *Reliving when her life had a purpose.*

*[Then again, I doubt even Ryuko has the answers for this.]*

~~~~~

Ryuko did arrive eventually. Nonon stopped playing briefly when she felt her presence rise from the street below, and they heard the faint click of Ryuko’s sneakers landing light as anything on the patio. And then much louder thud of Mako jumping out of her arms and scurrying towards the door.

“Ah, ‘course, shoulda known they wouldn’t be done,” Ryuko grunted, “This’s what I’m sayin’, give Nonon the slightest indication you care about music and... you see what happens.” She sighed, “Let’s go in, huh?”

“Ooh, could ya take me back to your place after?” Mako chirped, “If you don’t have anywhere to be. It’s just it’s been a while since I saw Satsuki last!”

“I’ll hafta check, y’know how it is she’s got lots of work,” Ryuko answered, Nonon could hear her walking up to the door as Mako opened it, “Oh, *Mako*, you’ve still got ketchup on your – here, let me just...”

It wasn’t clear exactly what Ryuko was doing but Mako giggled ticklishly in response, “Ryuuko! You’re not my mom!”

Satsuki absently noted their banter and gave Nonon a wave, mouthing “*They’ll be a few minutes.*”

So Nonon played on and was stilling playing when Ryuko walked down the hall and through the threshold to the den, Mako right behind her.

“Sats! Hey!” She shouted affectionately and then –

“*You are my darling daughter after all! Wearing a half-finished rag like Senketsu simply won’t do!*”

Ryuko’s hand was suddenly on her forehead, eyes wide, face frozen except for slight tic in the corner of her mouth. She staggered slightly. It was impossible to tell who reacted first, Satsuki or Mako.

“Oh, *fuck*,” She grunted perfunctorily, just to let everyone know that something was seriously wrong.

“Ryuko?” Satsuki sat bolt upright.

“Ryuko my *God!*” Mako, maybe unnecessarily, caught her and propped her up.

It was like a dam bursting. Ryuko had no fucking clue what was happening, she’d barely processed the music Nonon was playing. All she knew was that she suddenly had a vivid cut to a memory she’d never *ever* conjured up before, of blinding light and a face so like hers, so like Satsuki’s. She’d tried to forget that face. But she and Ragyo had never gotten that close, had she? Not with that sickening, silky smile on her face anyway. Not with feeling of... pounding heart, burning cheeks... arousal? This-this hadn’t happened, had it? No fucking way!

“*The bliss you feel when you’re worn by clothing, **that** is what happiness is!*”

The flood couldn’t be stopped now. Twenty years’ worth of fabricated memories suppressed until that moment. Grade school, middle school, high school – all her friends. The drama and the gossip but all of it fun, breezy, low stakes; sure, they might have their differences, but they were friends to the end and would always love each other. Landing at the top of the class year by year until she finally won acceptance in a prestigious college. Studying hard and partying harder there, beloved by the other kids and the professors alike. How she’d graduated with top marks, but only after she’d met the man of her dreams there. Man of her dreams? Hold on a second, why did that feel so... wrong (and why couldn’t she remember his face, or anything about him)? And then of course there was the ever-affectionate, gentle support of her mother.

Her mother...

“Come on, sit down now,” Mako said hurried, guiding her down to sit on the couch next to Satsuki, who immediately started rubbing her back reassuringly. Nonon was stricken by absolute shock, *at least one of them is reacting appropriately*. But she kept playing from muscle memory, barely a shift in the music. Ryuko still hadn’t understood that it was the music causing these long-suppressed memories to resurface, but that was beginning to dawn on Satsuki.

“Ryuko, Ryuko are you alright? Look at me,” Satsuki said insistently, putting her hand on Ryuko’s cheek to guide her eyes, “What’s happening?”



“I just had the strangest sense of – y’know déjà vu?” Ryuko said absently. For most people suddenly doubling the length of their perception of their lives would have been mind shattering, but then Ryuko had not too long ago gone through a way more mind shattering experience. This was just, uncomfortable, because suddenly she’d become aware there was this gap in her memory, like she’d gone on a twenty-year bender somehow. How had she forgotten so much?

Looking at Satsuki she had the answer.

Oh no. It was all fake. Akari, her best friend since third grade, who she’d driven home from Ryo’s house when he’d broken up with her and they’d spent all night staring at the stars talking about life ‘til she was over it, who had roomed with her every single semester at college, who’d been her maid of honor at her wedding? And then she looked at Mako, her *actual* best friend, and realized none of that could be true. In third grade the other girls would barely talk to her, she had no fucking idea who Ryo was, and she’d lived in the penthouse Satsuki had given her through most of college. And obviously she’d never had a wedding because she wasn’t in love with some faceless man she was in love with *Satsuki*. A person she was sure she’d known almost her whole life was gone forever, had never even existed in the first place.

Or Hannah, the American heiress who’d been so lonesome when her family first moved to Japan until they invited her into their clique? She’d been to her grandfather’s mansion in the Hamptons, except she hadn’t, had she? Or Tomua, the frat brother of her non-existent boyfriend who’d introduced her to weed and fighting games and him? It didn’t seem possible, they seemed so *real*, as deep and fully realized as the three obviously real women in the room.

And yet all these new memories were so blatantly contradictory it had to be some kind of illusion. She had gone from birth to early twenties twice, and the craziest part was until just a couple years ago she had much fonder feelings towards the false memories than the real! It took Senketsu – everything after meeting Senketsu she wouldn’t trade for anything, even the bad stuff. But before that, it was like whatever had wormed its way into her mind had known exactly what to feed her, exactly what she’d trade her miserable life for.

“Ryuko?”

“Hey, hey, I got you some water,” Mako offered the glass, sitting on Ryuko’s left side opposite Satsuki. Ryuko, guilty over making them worry when she zoned out processing all this – but yet suspecting it might happen again – nodded and drank deeply, straightening herself up and trying to clear her head. Fake memories, she ought to be used to mindfucks by now.

“So, should I... uh... should I stop?” Nonon asked, and Satsuki’s head whipped around quickly, and she shook her answer, no.

“Sats, what the fuck is this? This music, why’d you make her... I-It’s like it’s in my head! What is this?” Ryuko said with returning composure, taking her by the shoulder.

“You remember that music I sent to Nonon? This is the finished version. It’s... It is the music that I heard playing when I wore Junketsu,” Satsuki answered hesitantly, “I didn’t expect you would hear it, I just had her play it to-“

“Junketsu. Holy shit,” It clicked for Ryuko, “That’s how it controls you. It fills you head with this, a whole life, all an illusion. And it distracts you while it takes your body and...”

When Ryuko trailed off, Satsuki asked, “Do you remember what happened to your body? Or, nevermind, what did you see?”

“Hold on, I’m thinkin’...” Ryuko muttered darkly. This time, Ryuko didn’t have a flashback burst to blame. Maybe she couldn’t conjure them up before, but they were there fitting nicely into the continuum of real events. She always assumed that Junketsu had just cut off the brain-body connection and puppeted her, but here was the proof that wasn’t it.

*“Well? Do you like how Junketsu feels on your body?”*

*“It’s... wonderful...”*

A shudder passed through Ryuko’s body. That one, of her laying on downy white sheets, Ragyo and Nui caressing her nude body, that was just another fabricated one she had to conclude. Who knew what Junketsu’s fucked up perception of a human family would be?

But the other ones – descending on the *Naked Sol*, Satsuki and Senketsu’s desperate battle against her. Holding her limp body up by the chin, feeling how the frailty of the bone beneath which would surrender to her grip even if the woman it was part of never would. On the faltering vestiges of Senketsu had saved her from her skull popping like a blister

*“Feelin’ better now? Do ya? Huh, **Lady Satsuki?** Hell, your feet ain’t even touchin’ the ground.”*

Ryuko flung her hands off of Satsuki’s shoulders, suddenly aware of how the tremendous strength coursing through them could crush her like a bug. And had come far, far too close already.

“Yeah, I do remember it. Why didn’t you tell me?” She exclaimed, suddenly not comfortable being near her. Or Mako, and she lept up and pointed at both of them, yelling, “I nearly killed both of you, a-and I’m just finding that out now?”

“It’s in the past,” Satsuki said gently.

And Mako offered, “You weren’t yourself.”

Both valid sounding, but Ryuko knew better. Because to her it was as though this had all just happened, it was so vivid. And because it *was* herself.

*The world really is so unfair, she’d thought to herself as she lifted Satsuki’s trembling body, Look at this perfect creature, this angel, and I can’t have her. Not just because she’s an ice-cold bitch who hates my guts, but because she’s my fucking sister. I can’t stand it anymore! If she won’t surrender to me, if she can’t be mine, then I might as well just kill her.* Perverted, stretched into something savage and awful though they might have been, those were her feelings about Satsuki at the time. It was like all Junketsu had done was unleashed her darkest impulses then sat back and laughed.

Or when Mako had burst into the church. *Don’t you see, Mako. Everything out there is so fucked, but here I can be happy. Nobody loves me there, they only see me as a weapon or a monster because that’s all I am. But here I can just be me. That’s all I want. It’s all I need to be happy. And If you try to ruin it, I’ll straight-up kill you!* Again, that wasn’t far off, not far at all from the dark thoughts that had clouded her mind as she rode off to kill Ragyo and Nui alone.

She shook her head, frustrated and guilty but also relieved. Who knows what kind of psychological trigger playing Junketsu's music had tripped in her head, but it had lifted this hidden shadow from her. Now that she knew, bittersweet though it was to let all those fake memories go, it couldn't hurt her anymore. And it was a point of pride that in previous years a revelation like this would've probably made her cry or start screaming or run off to sulk someplace. She just had to fight through the last of it.

"I'm sorry," she said, flopping down, "That was bad of me. I don't need to freak out like that. It just sucks to have to look my younger, stupider self in the face like that."

"Don't say that," Mako hugged her and petted her forehead. She looked over at Satsuki, pleading for some direction of what to do next. She said, "Dya want to talk about it? I-I might not get it but I kind wanna know what I walked in on today."

"Ohh Mako," Ryuko ruffled her hair affectionately, "I'll tell ya, but you really don't wanna know."

"Yes, I feel all also owe all of you quite a lengthy explanation," Satsuki nodded. "But Ryuko, you cannot blame yourself for this. You couldn't have known."

"Ah, sure I could've. Everyone warned me. Crazy though, how just one little piece of music could bring it all back," Ryuko said, which reminded her of Nonon's presence, "How're ya doing over there? Look like you've seen a ghost!"

Nonon was still mechanically playing, she didn't really know what else to do and mostly hoped that Ryuko would just get over her weirdness and get out, and she stammered, "Wha- are you kidding! You're over there having a PTSD flashback and you try and mock me!" Which maybe hit the nail on the head when it came to Nonon's appraisal of the situation. *Maybe Ryuko does have a legitimate trauma disorder. Wouldn't be surprising, after all things have happened to her which I can't even understand. But Satsuki does. They've been through the same things. Hell, that's probably why Satsuki asked me to play this, because she can't remember things from when she was wearing Junketsu.* It made Nonon kind of sad to think that Satsuki might have forgotten the final acts of Honnouji, triumphs and defeats all, just because Junketsu had blotted them out.

"I wasn't, honest! You just look like you'd rather be anywhere else," Ryuko observed, and Satsuki frowned at her – this was Nonon's home, after all.

"No way! I'm here to help Satsuki deal with how Ragyo messed her up, and if you're in the same boat honestly even you don't deserve *her* so –,"

"What? Who said anything about Ragyo we're talking about-," No, that wasn't it, there was still something she wasn't thinking about, something she didn't want to see, "About Junketsu..." Ryuko trailed off with a sudden heaving breath. She could tell Nonon thought that Ragyo had taken advantage of her helpless body just the same as she had Satsuki for all those years, and Ryuko wanted to tell her that wasn't true but-

*"Relish it. You and I are the only ones who can experience this feeling."*

"Oh no, it's starting again!" Mako said distantly. *Drive it out of your head Ryuko, c'mon, think of anything else!* But she couldn't

*"Now that you're one with it, the purpose of humans should be clear."*

“No, no! Ryuko, look at me, talk to me,” Satsuki held her face again, but Ryuko reflexively twisted away, clutching her arms tight to her chest and clenching her legs together in the futile defense against ghost hands whose touch was still sliding on her skin as though it had just happened.

“Ragyo, she-,” Ryuko managed, looking to Satsuki. She knew Satsuki would understand, and from the bleeding sadness in her eyes it was clear she did.

*“Humans exist to serve clothing.”*

What a ridiculous, insensate thing to say with Nui perched over you, that hateful, delicate, body opening like a pale pink flower. With Ragyo’s own fingers inside-

“She’s *crying*,” Mako exclaimed, which wasn’t untrue, though it wasn’t sobbing just tears rolling from glassy eyes that Ryuko wiped persistently at. “What’s going on? What did you do?” She demanded of the only person who seemed in condition to answer, Nonon.

“It’s the same as with Satsuki. Ragyo got her claws into her and I... think she’s just realized what happened now,” Nonon said darkly.

Mako put the pieces together surprisingly quickly, “Oh my god, you’re saying that Ragyo-,” Nonon glared at her over the top of the piano as if to say *“don’t say the word, you might set her off even worse”*. “Ohh, my poor Ryuko! What did they do to you?”

*“Come on Ryuko, hurry up and show me! Let me see what you look like in your finest.”*

In her youth, especially in those months when she’d wandered homeless after the death of her father, there had been plenty of creeps and thugs who thought Ryuko looked like easy prey. They all swiftly regretted it of course, Ryuko never let a single one get close – even before the serum wore off she was strong and fast and a crafty fighter. It was a bit scary, sure, but she came to see it as a nuisance. There were bad people in the world, it was just something you had to look out for in life as a woman.

This was the first time one of those bad people had gotten to her. And it was Ragyo, the person who was responsible for everything wrong in Ryuko’s life, hell, everything wrong in the world. Her own mother. And she’d made Ryuko want it, yearn for it, *beg* for it. She could throw up, her whole skin felt greasy, filthy, and she couldn’t imagine it ever coming out.

Maybe it was scariest to think that this is what Satsuki must have lived with all along. She wasn’t as strong as Satsuki, she didn’t have the secret to living with this. How did one go on knowing that even the most intimate things about them could be taken?

Finally Nonon stood up, lifted her hands from the piano, “Alright, this is getting ridiculous. Come on, let’s lay you down and-,”

“Don’t you stop!” Ryuko shouted at her, and Nonon was so taken aback that she plopped back down on the piano bench. Ryuko looked taken aback too, but when she looked at Satsuki she nodded and made a fist. Ryuko had her answer, had Satsuki’s secret, and the fire came back in her eyes. “I’m gonna fight it. I’ll fight this thing out. I’m stronger than a few bad memories. I’m stronger than her.”

And so Nonon played on

~~~~~

Satsuki never did return to work that afternoon, and amazingly somehow society didn't collapse around their feet.

Ryuko had stopped crying, pulled herself together once again, and so Nonon had finally stopped playing for good (and not a moment too soon, even her limber hands had a limit). She'd pulled up the armchair that matched that white couch and was listening, observing as Ryuko and Satsuki talked. Mako was still there, listening too with much more rapt attention.

Ryuko had just finished telling them all about the fake life Junketsu had implanted in her. It was nice to describe it all, actually. Like laying it to rest.

Satsuki concluded, "Then my suspicions seem to be confirmed. Junketsu must operate by somehow discovering your deep desires, the life you most wish you could have, and seducing you with visions of that. It's no wonder it's so hard to resist."

"Really? So what did you see?" Ryuko asked simply.

"Oh it's, well, actually I'm not sure I want to."

"Ah, c'mon, we'll understand if it's 'old Satsuki' stuff, don't worry!"

"No it's not that it's just," Satsuki paused to chuckle casually. It was nice for Nonon to see her smile like that, "It's a little embarrassing."

"Sats. No way it's worse than being a suck-up honor student every day since kindergarden."

"Oh alright," Satsuki sighed, "It was in feudal times, old shogunate Japan – see, I knew you'd laugh!" Satsuki shoved Ryuko gently on the shoulder when a bark of laughter broke from her, "I'm serious! I don't know how but the anachronism wasn't what made me skeptical. I was a warrior princess, a Diamyo, trained from birth because my father had no sons but could see my potential. I had a beautiful little castle by the sea, but I was often away at war. Who knows what war, over what, but I never lost a battle, never betrayed an alliance, lived the path of honor and my people loved me for it. Maybe it's just Junketsu's effect, maybe I really was born centuries too late, but I really believe if I had a time machine the real me could do all that and more. It was nice, but I never was consumed by it. It wasn't as detailed as yours."

Ryuko was still smirking, but she said, "I shoulda guessed it'd be something like that. And you *know* you would've done so well, at that. Born a few centuries ago we'd all remember you as the one who united Japan. We'd probably rule the world by now."

"And there was a woman, too. Not my spouse, I had a political marriage, but a lady of the court who was the one I really allowed into my life. That was a pretty consistent detail."

"Really?"

"Yes. She had Ragyo's face, which was very, very disconcerting of course, but she wasn't anything like her. She was a little younger than me, always getting in trouble, sneaking out at night to see me. Ryuko I – I always thought that was meant to be you," Satsuki finished softly. Nonon felt a little nauseous at how saccharine this all was, but she bit it down. She was over the fact that

only Ryuko could open Satsuki up, help her. Satsuki had someone, and that was enough. And it looked like that ran both ways. They needed each other.

“Sats,” Ryuko’s eyes were wet again, but the good kind. She didn’t need to say anything more.

“So did you ask me to compose the song so you could remember all that?” Nonon asked uncritically, “So you could look back on it?”

Satsuki shook her head, said, “Well, yes and no. I always knew the false memories had been cut out, because I wrote some notes about them and then when Junketsu was tamed with Ryuko’s blood and Senketsu’s life-fibers I found that I didn’t know what those notes were talking about. But it was everything else – I didn’t forget it, I just – it was starting to get foggy. I was just hoping that the nostalgia would make me feel closer to the old days.”

Nonon nodded, lost in thought. *Nostalgia? What was there to be nostalgic for? Oh, we had some good fights sure but Honnouji was mostly terrible, the war against Ragyo was mostly terrible.*

Saiban reminded her of what she’d absently wondered before, *[Remember what she said when we first got back. She’s nostalgic for the time when her life had a purpose.]* And he was right, but Nonon still felt like she could slap Satsuki all over again.

“So how’d you know?” Mako asked, like a child kept in suspense at the very end of a bedtime story, “How’d you know what was real and what wasn’t if it wasn’t the time difference?”

“Well, for one thing I don’t think that Junketsu was really trying. I made it perfectly clear that when what I had to do was done it would have me, all of me. But if it tried to take me before then I would fight tooth and nail until I destroyed us both. Cruel thing that it was, it assumed I was equally devoid of anything but spite and malice, and so it never called my bluff. I doubt if it overwhelmed me as it did Ryuko that I could have resisted, but it thought I was stronger than that. Didn’t mean it didn’t try. But when it did, it was just like you and Ryuko, Mako,” But yet she was looking at Nonon as she spoke, “Junketsu never thought about the my Elites. Never thought about Nonon. If ever I couldn’t find her, if she wasn’t there when I woke up in the morning, then I knew it was all fake and in less than a second it was gone. It thought people were too interchangeable, thought that it could replace them with new underlings, new allies and I’d like them just as much. And so I used that weakness.”

“Wow... you are a genius Sats,” Ryuko said, and though she smiled at the complement, the corner of Satsuki’s gaze was still pointedly on Nonon.

Who surprised everyone by suddenly saying, “Ah, fuck. I’ll-I’ll be right back.” She hurried out to the patio and – small mercies – nobody followed on her heels to make sure she was okay. Because then she would have had the pressure to either drum up some tears or make herself presentable when what she really felt was somewhere in between. Just plain old overwhelmed, really.

After that day there was a surprising shift in Nonon’s attitude toward Ryuko and Satsuki. Before it was clear she had nothing but contempt and rage for the entire idea. Afterward, sure she still scoffed, quipped sarcastically about how nauseatingly sappy they could be, but if anyone ever suggested that they didn’t have to put up with it, that maybe it wouldn’t last, she’d say: “What are you talking about? This is the way it has to be. They need each other.”

Back on the shores of the perfect lake. Senketsu sat with his feet in the water, obsidian skin glinting in the sun. When he turned to see Ryuko, there was a grim look on his newly made face.

“I’m ready. Show me how to bring her here,” She said, vengeful eagerness under her own resolve.

“You don’t have anything to hide from me. I know you’re going to make her pay. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

UPDATE: Hey guys check out this awesome fanart FishTheTaco2 made of this chapter! It portrays what Ryuko experiences in her flashbacks in this chapter:



## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was one of the ones I've been planning since forever. However, unlike some of the others it kind of grew from an originally fairly simple scene. I like it this way but I was surprised as I wrote it how much material I'd planned for it.

Next up: The Ragyo Chapter

It's gonna be a beast, so it may take slightly longer than the "weekish" schedule. But it has to be good so that's what gonna happen.



# The Perfect Monster

## Chapter Notes

Update: next chapter might take an extra week or I might just drop the first half soon. It's taking longer than I thought and this is a busy week for me too.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

September 2034

~~~~~

“Tora! I’m so sorry!”

It had happened in just an instant. A single swing perfectly placed to crack a hidden weak point in the shinai’s smooth bamboo. Just an instant of wood creaking and ripping to reveal that beautifully sharpened point, lethal but just a bit too frayed to look as intentional as it was. And the momentum carried it on, past Tora’s defenses, through her gi and into the softness between her ribs.

It had to look like an accident.

And now she lay, silky black hair pooled around her, a look of something beyond shock on her face as the metallic taste invaded her throat and the red stain slowly dribbled across her chest.

The younger girl flung herself to her knees beside her, looking totally distraught (she’d always been a good actress, but this was her masterwork). “Go get help!” She yelled to the bodyguards, and they obeyed. “Just stay with me!” She urged Tora for their benefit – they weren’t her creatures, but most of the rest of the household were. They wouldn’t find help in time. They wouldn’t find anyone. And now it was just the two of them, alone on the stark alabaster of the training floor, the echoes of the younger girl’s shinai shattering still blasting off the smooth concrete walls.

“No, you’re not,” Tora gasped. “It’s okay. You don’t have to pretend anymore.”

And the younger girl smiled her silky smile and said, “You’re right. That was-,” She paused to let out a horribly sensual sigh, “The best moment of my life.”

And Tora smiled too, “I know. Even now you’re so amazing, Okami.”

“Don’t call me that,” The younger girl’s face turned ugly, a hideously petulant scowl that marred its otherwise perfect beauty. “Don’t call me the name our parents gave me. I rejected it.”

“I’m sorry,” Tora said tenderly, reaching up to stroke the messy grey locks (well, not really grey, more like black turning directly to white strand by strand) of her younger sister’s shoulder-length hair, “Ragyo. ‘Silk Dawn’. It’s fitting. You’ll be the one to do it... I know you

will. I-I'm sorry I couldn't be the one, I wasn't worthy of being the eldest Kiryuin. I wasn't... strong enough. Not... like you."

"It doesn't matter," Ragyo reassured her, at once loving and playful, "I was always going to kill you. Just so I could experience *this*. Feel," She gingerly took Tora's hand and brought it down to her waist, under her gi, between her legs. Dripping wet. Tora looked up at her, rapidly fading eyes filled with divine wonder. "I only wish I could've made it last longer."

But this was all they were going to get. The blood was streaking down Tora's creamy white skin now. "Ragyo... I... love you," Tora finally managed, with great effort.

"I know," Ragyo said as she unceremoniously straddled Tora, forcing the shinai to twist. Tora's gasp at that agonizing motion was simply electrifying, and Ragyo kissed her with a furious passion as though she wanted to rip her tongue out, eviscerate her face with her teeth. Trying to drink up her last moments, possess her as she never could in when every day Tora had to go out there and be the Kiryuin heiress, the world's Tora. Now every last drop left was just Ragyo's.

By the time their lips parted, she was gone.

She whipped up some tears for the returning guards. But the tears she cried at the funeral a week later, those she didn't need to fake.

~~~~~

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

"You had a sister. You loved her more than anything. And you killed her."

Ryuko flicked her finger disdainfully, and with it came a perfectly straight razor of life-fibers that shot up into her body and vanished. And a spurt of blood from the hole in Ragyo's forehead that it left behind.

"GAAAAH!" She howled as she dropped to the concrete, shaking. The blood and cerebral fluid kept dribbling out and the wound wouldn't heal, but yet she couldn't die.

In life Ragyo had been taller than Ryuko. Strikingly tall, actually, Amazonian. Here though it was Ryuko who towered over her. Without the glowing rainbow fox-ears her hair hung limp, fluffy in its pure whiteness, and in the absence of its glow her skin was pale and bloodless, damp with sweat. Her eyes – bloodshot – were returned to their natural blue.

And she trembled as Ryuko stalked around her, her "wings" of light and life-fibers spread behind her. Everything here was by Ryuko's design, even the location. Somehow it was this imagined alleyway, filled with garbage, shadowed by crumbling brick tenements, with fast food wrappers and beer bottles blowing down the grease stained pavement that terrified her most. Far more than any of the hellish visions of brimstone or flesh-lined chambers of magma that Ryuko had dreamed up. To die forgotten, consumed by the hives of the brute masses she so despised, Ryuko could *feel* that this was the purest horror to her. She even dressed the part, with the long baggy coat draping over her shoulders and the glowing tattoos that crawled and moved on her skin. The smile was the same though, that predatory toothy grin that said, "I'm going to kill you".

And the other one, he was even worse. The shadow of a man, leaning against the wall, skin and suit black like stone and with that familiar-looking face. Soichiro's ghost, come to torment her too. His eyes burned right through her, molten orange and unblinking. He silently reminded her that even if she could run from Ryuko there was no escape.

"Just let me die," She gasped.

Ryuko's grin went even wider. She'd been preparing herself for a real confrontation, a battle of minds to subdue her mother, a final duel to break her. And yet she'd already won. *She'd already won.*

That was a relief, yes, but mostly it filled her with savage glee. If it were anybody else, she would've been disturbed by how good it felt to hurt something.

But yet, she knew that compared to anybody else given the chance to do this to Ragyo she was showing remarkable restraint. She knew, because before coming she'd asked Satsuki what she would do if she had the chance. It had taken some coaxing to get out her true feelings, but once she had... well, tears followed, but the angry, cathartic kind. And some creative ideas.

"You killed her. Why would you do that?"

"I don't – I don't," Ragyo sobbed, still trying to will herself to get up but only capable of crawling away, her whole body searing numb from the experience of having her memory probed. "Just kill me, just kill me, *please.*"

Ryuko chuckled, "Aw, what's wrong? What happened to 'I'll decide when I die, huh?'," She lifted Ragyo by the hair, the blood still trickling from her forehead nearly blinding her, and placed a fingernail right above her bellybutton. Suddenly the nail was razor sharp, and she drew it ever-so-slowly up Ragyo's stomach, leaving a deep incision. Her guts roiled and bulged as though this was their chance to make a getaway, and her cheeks went wide as the agony sought an escape, but Ryuko wouldn't permit her to vomit, "It's sad, really. You said that, and for a moment there it seemed like you actually had some dignity. Just a moment though. But I'm sorry," Ryuko spoke through the malicious grin, "Even if I knew how to kill you, I wouldn't."

She threw her down and the impact caused the incision to burst, and suddenly there was viscera half-inside Ragyo, half-strewn across the alley. Ryuko watched her, eyes softening just a little as she observed how this imagined body, this mannequin she'd shoved her mother into didn't even have the strength to move. Those bloodshot blue eyes were far away, and she croaked, "Nui... Tora... some...body."

*I should – I should stop, right? Give it a break?* Ryuko thought, for Senketsu. *I-I'm not a bad person!*

*I won't egg you on Ryuko,* Senketsu responded, *I know what you think has to be done. It's up to you.*

So Ryuko snapped her finger and the hole in Ragyo's belly sealed, slicing off the extruded part of her still pulsing guts. Ragyo gasped as her ability to breathe was suddenly restored. The viscera outside her body melted into dust, leaving her feeling a dull, hollow ache as it wasn't permitted to regenerate inside her.

“This is hell, isn’t it? I’m in hell,” Ragyo muttered once she’d caught her breath. “You-you’re not really *her*. You just-,”

“Well, I’m just *flattered*,” Ryuko walked over to where she lay prone, trying to prop herself up on quaking arms, and crouched down, “But no. There is no hell. There’s just you... and me.” She looked Ragyo dead in the eyes, “Hi Mom.”

“Ryuko...” Ragyo’s voice was filled with horrible astonishment, as though she was seeing her for the first time. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry! Just-just kill me already.”

“Oho you’re *sorry*? That’s rich. What’re you sorry for, huh?”

“I...”

“You know why you killed Tora? I’ll tell you because you clearly don’t even know. It’s not because she wasn’t strong enough, she didn’t have what it took to be the one to kill the world, no! I saw it, it’s because at the sight of her even talking to another girl – or even a guy, anyone – you wanted to murder every living thing. It’s because you couldn’t *own* her, and if she couldn’t be yours you might as well kill her. And it’s because it made you *cum*! You’ve never been sorry for a single thing in your life.”

Ryuko straightened up, and Ragyo saw the memory probing life-fiber forming on the tip of her finger.

“No, no! Anything but *that*!”

“But you will be.”

~~~~~

July 2067

~~~~~

“Are you’re certain you know what you’re doing?”

“Yeah, basically. I mean, if I can break it I can fix it, eh?” Ryuko grunted from her position under Satsuki’s armored car, knees tucked up to lift the bumper so she could work fairly freely in a position that would crush a human. “Gimme that wrench again? The little one.”

Satsuki, crouching next to the open toolbox with her hands on her knees, dutifully obliged. “I do not think that’s how it works.”

“Ah, I’m doin’ fine,” Ryuko said dismissively, “Besides, I know what I’m doing. One ‘a my schools I used to go down to this auto-shop when I cut class. Guys there liked me because I had little hands, could fit into all the cracks.”

“That’s amazing! I had no idea you were mechanically inclined. Or, well, I knew you knew a lot about motorcycles but...”

“Oho no, if you’re trying to get me to figure out what’s wrong with the hot water in the guest room, you’ll need to use more than flattery. Soldering iron?”

“Should wear a mask,” Satsuki said as she passed it, “Even if you don’t need one?”

“What, and hide my pretty face?” Ryuko smiled, her face already fairly hidden by engine grease, “Nah, c’mon.” Her work didn’t seem to be much impeded by the lack of the mask, she had the kind of thick overalls on that wouldn’t light to just any old spark and her skin obviously didn’t care much. Still, it was punctuated by occasionally grunts and expletives. “I can’t believe how much damage one fucking garbage can did!”

“It was a big metal one, you know a street corner one,” Satsuki sighed, “We can always hire a professional, you know.”

“Nah, I just gotta patch this hole in the oil filter and reattach the timing belt, I’m nearly done. And besides, you could always just drive yourself rather than have one of your secret service goons do it. I mean, *you* probably wouldn’t go on the curb to get around roadwork just because you were in a rush, right?”

“Eh,” Satsuki shrugged.

“You don’t like driving?” Ryuko asked out of genuine curiosity.

“I’m not really sure I like *cars*,” Satsuki answered, “Which, I’m sorry, I know you do.”

“Well, bikes more, definitely,” Ryuko answered, “But yeah. We should take this thing out sometime though if you’re gonna keep it parked in the cottage driveway. It might look like any other basic black government vehicle, but it’s got some decent gear under the hood.”

“Really?” Satsuki craned her neck to try to look, “You can tell that?”

“Sure. Cars are different from other machines, y’know. The good ones, they’ve got a bit of character to them and – AHH *baise ta mère!*” Ryuko suddenly exclaimed as she tilted the car the wrong way and the hole in the oil filter leaked out on her face. The moment she said it though she swiftly clapped a hand over her mouth and looked at Satsuki with wide eyes.

Satsuki looked back at her with just as wide, shocked eyes. “Ryuko, that was *French!*”

“Ah, yeah,” Ryuko sighed, “Don’t freak out though.”

Satsuki crossed her arms, “Do I look like I’m freaking out?” The tone though was more “*Explain yourself, now.*”

“Yeah well, remember how I said I was gonna look at Ragyo’s memories over on the other side? I’ve been... learning things from it.”

“Like French.”

“*And English too,*” Ryuko said, in English.

Satsuki’s expression was somehow even more stupefied. “Well, I’m not worried that she possessed you,” She said, “Because that accent is just. Wow. It’s not good.”

“Fuck off, I’m trying my best!”

“And also because she’d be appalled if she knew you were using her French skills for such vulgar cursing,”

Ryuko grinned, “Hell of a way to tell ya though, but trust me I’ve learned way more useful stuff. Leadership stuff. Mostly what *not* to do. So far it seems to be most ‘don’t assassinate people or try to destroy the world’.”

Satsuki chuckled, and it brought a little pang to Ryuko because what she’d learned, what she’d seen in that freak show’s head wasn’t a laughing matter. Nor was what she and Senketsu were doing to her, Satsuki probably imagined the old Ragyo, great and terrible, not the new broken and half-mad one. It was a world of horrors and she didn’t want to even begin unpacking it with Satsuki – no, she needed to be protected from it! But Satsuki had a way of finding things out.

“But seriously,” Satsuki said, “I... can’t imagine it’s easy but you have to keep doing that. Imagine what else she knew; you could find the REVOCS hidden base! The war could be over in days!”

“Oh, I’ll let you know if I find something like that. Forty-six years to sort through, you know.”

“I see,” Satsuki pursed her lips hesitantly, “And what about the more personal side? There isn’t – there’s no way you’ve seen *me*, have you?”

“Sats. You’d really be best off not asking. Trust me.”

“Oh,” Satsuki looked minorly disappointed, and Ryuko did want to help her. Help her understand what had happened to her, get some closure. There just weren’t any satisfying answers. “I imagine that once she hybridized herself, you must be encountering the enemy directly through her. It can’t be easy.”

“Look, this is a woman who killed her –,” And Ryuko cut herself off because her major source of anxiety just came into focus. *Ragyo had an older sister. They loved each other, not too different from me and Sats. How she felt about Tora, not too different from how I felt about Sats under Junketsu’s control. So, what does that mean? Sats won’t take it well. But... God, if they’re really like prior incarnations of us then what are we supposed to do? It’s all destiny. But thing is I won, I got to keep Satsuki because I’m not psychopath to the core, and it must eat her alive to see us.* “-Who killed dozens of people before she was eighteen. For fun. Believe me, it’s rough way before then. Just... seriously this isn’t for you to know about, alright? Take my fuckin’ word.”

Satsuki shrugged and said, “I believe you, I do. And I do appreciate you taking it upon yourself, I just want you to know that. It can’t be easy.”

“Easier that filling in this damn seam... got it!” Ryuko grunted, and all at once the soldering iron cut off and she smoothly slid out from under the car, slowly lowering it to the ground with her hand. “She’s done!” Ryuko proudly wiped her hands as she stood up.

“Really? That it?”

“Well I sure hope so ‘else you’ll actually have to call a professional! Only one way to find out. Keys?” Ryuko held out her hand.

“Very well, we shall see indeed,” Satsuki said as she handed them over. Ryuko wasted no time clambering into the driver’s seat and started the armored car. To both their stunned surprise, it started with no problems, and they looked at each other with wide eyes.

“I... can’t believe it!” Satsuki exclaimed, “How’d you do it?”

“I fixed the car,” Ryuko explained simply, scooting it back and forth across the driveway in slow gentle motions. Enjoying the admiring expressing on Satsuki face she said, “What?”

“Oh, just... you. Come here,” And Ryuko practically skipped into Satsuki’s arms. “That was fun.”

“You busy?” Ryuko said, “Wanna take a little joyride?”

“I think I just might.”

“Sweet. Lemme just change and – hey, what’re ya – mmrph! Knock-it-off!” Ryuko was cut off as Satsuki took a clean rag from the toolbox and roughly cleaned her face of all the grime, forcing her to squint and squirm. She was rewarded for her tolerance though when she opened her eyes and Satsuki gave her a quick, casual kiss.

“No, don’t worry about it.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“You just look so precious in those overalls, is all.”

~~~~~

January 2036

~~~~~

She killed her mother too.

This one wasn’t quite so perfectly premeditated. Oh sure, she’d planned on putting an end to her, no doubt. Shidzue Kiryuin had overseen the mass popular uprisings of the 2020s, the increasingly militarized response of governments around the world, and the eventual transformation of the global economy to the dynastic megacorporation system that would see REVOCS finally achieve the world dominance it needed. They’d had their experiments with aristocracy, fascism, communism, and none had stuck. The hypercapitalists though, that stuck, and Shidzue was the elder Kiryuin who oversaw that great victory. But Ragyo looked at all this and saw that even so Shidzue wouldn’t be capable of taking the next step, the final step.

She was sad, that was it. Her heart ached even as she pulled the trigger condemning millions to die in a planet-spanning string of civil wars. And she loved animals. She had such a menagerie of rare rainforest birds, tropical fish. To destroy all of that, *all of it*, was something she had too much conscience to do even though she knew it was right, it was the way of the universe.

“In a godless world, the only truth is following the natural order of the universe”. That’s what she would say, but her heart wasn’t in it. Ragyo saw how she wandered like a ghost around the manor, saw the sadness behind her cool teal-blue eyes, and knew she was weak.

So, she had multiple plans going, but the one that ended up working was pure luck. A few weeks prior, Ragyo had a physical. She was always quick to listen to doctors, to keep herself in peak condition, her body utterly immaculate. Of course, less so when it came to her mental health – Shidzue had tried to get her a psychiatrist once but the woman had mysteriously disappeared. In any case, at this physical Ragyo learned an interesting fact: she had a very rare, very lethal allergy to a specific kind of tropical tree nut.

And she figured what the hell, maybe it was heritable. Might as well try it.

So it was with a certain amount of genuine shock that she leapt to her feet as Shidzue suddenly started hacking and clawing at her throat at dinner, face red. Just a bite of her salad and that was it for her.

“Shi-Shidzue – No! Oh, no, no *no no* just hold on, hold on!” Shidzue’s bodyguard – and food taster – was immediately at an absolute loss. In a flash absolute despair overcame her at her failure, and Ragyo relished it. Oh, how Ragyo hated that woman, with her perfectly toned figure, her devastatingly stony and smooth face, and that dashing scar across her eye. She knew all about Shidzue’s real relationship with her bodyguard – her lover – and it made her want to tear herself apart in sheer jealousy. How could such a weak, unworthy Kiryuin possess such a perfect specimen as that? But despite her loyalty, despite her love, she wasn’t able to detect this threat and she wept as she clutched Shidzue’s crumpling body to her chest and screamed, “You can’t die! You can’t! Don’t leave me! I’ll, I’ll get help! Just hold on for me!”

There was chaos in the vast dining hall as soon as she ran out, and all of a sudden all the attending staff were running everywhere. And then it was just her and Shidzue.

She took her time strolling up the length of the table, watching the panic rise in Shidzue’s eyes. “Hello mother,” She grinned.

“... you...?” Shidzue managed to croak; she realized she was done for and stopped trying to prevent her own asphyxiation.

“Oh, don’t act so surprised,” Ragyo laughed, that sophisticated and aloof laugh she took such pride in, “It was me who killed Tora too, after all. You really should’ve had your guard up after that,” Ragyo watched the realization creep over her mother’s face. “Aww, you didn’t figure it out, did you? Your precious little firstborn.” Ragyo’s voice suddenly turned sour and scornful, “What did you expect, honestly?”

“... your... father?” Shidzue asked.

“Huh? Oh, oh my goodness no!” Ragyo started laughing all over again, “No, cholesterol was the assassin there, rest assured. I didn’t have anything to do with the death of my dear old daddy.”

“... but... why... Okami I... always loved you...”

Ragyo scowled at that, “That isn’t my name Mother, not anymore. I’ve discarded it, like all the other refuse you’ve ever given me. But as for why, well it’s like you’ve always said, *In a godless world, the only truth is following the natural order of the universe*. And part of that order is this: Only the strong survive.”



That would be the last thing Shidzue Kiryuin ever heard, as she collapsed face down with one last feeble rattle, her perfectly white hair stained by a tipped bowl of soup. By the time her bodyguard had returned Ragyo was well in place, crocodile tears rolling right on cue. It wouldn't be like Tora, the slow sinking in that she was really gone. There would be no genuine tears for her. Ragyo felt nothing for this feeble creature, she was only useful for the little entertainment value she'd provided as she perished, otherwise she was just an obstacle.

"Ohhh," Her bodyguard gasped, a choked noise that devolved into silent, body shaking sobs. *So this is what it's like when someone's will to live goes while they are still alive,* Ragyo noted with interest. "Oh, oh my-my Shidzue. I'm sorry, *I'm sorry,*" She slumped against the wall in a heap.

"She's gone," Ragyo whimpered, fully intending to provoke her.

It worked. In a flash she was up, seizing Ragyo by the collar. It was amazing how quick she was. "You! You don't fool me, I know you were behind this! You'll pay, *you'll pay!*" And her hand was going towards something tucked in the back of her belt, no doubt either a knife or a gun. Ragyo wasn't afraid though.

"How *could* you!" Ragyo sobbed, "How dare you? My mother's *dead!* She's-she's *gone* and there was nothing I could – oh God!"

Even Shidzue's bodyguard was caught momentarily off guard by this genuine seeming performance. Just momentarily though, and suddenly there was pistol in Ragyo's face. "What're you doing!" She gasped, "No! You can't really think *I* k-killed her!"

"Lady Muramasa, please!" It was Kuroido, ostensibly the household steward of the Kiryuins but unofficially Ragyo's loyal servant. He bravely put a hand on her arm and said, "You're both in shock. I think you should go home," His words were gentle, but the implication behind them was clear. The other servants of the household were returning to the dining hall – they were Ragyo's and they all had their own concealed weapons. She could either walk out or be buried somewhere on the grounds.

She straightened up, face tight with fury. "Fine. But mark my words Okami, you'll *pay* for this. You'll pay!"

Ragyo didn't break character, but inside she thought, *I'd like to see you try. Because with her out of the picture I'm the most powerful woman in the world.*

Lady Muramasa did indeed try, but it wasn't enough. It was enough for more than a hundred of Ragyo's loyal zealots, but then they were not in short supply. It took Ragyo's handpicked guard, the first of the couturière order, to stop her, and all the blood and bullet casings would take months to fully clean from the manors many halls. She didn't scream as she fell – this was a woman who had lost everything.

But she would scream. She would scream plenty in her new home, deep in the Kiryuin manor's basement, right next to Ragyo's psychiatrist. She would scream for many years more. And when she was finally spent, well, the Primordial Life-fiber always needed more living fuel.

~~~~~

~~~~~

The brass orb, this was what Ryuko had found to be the single most effective form of torture she could imagine. A perfect, hollow sphere of brass hanging suspended in the air, just the size for a person to curl up inside and no larger. It floated above a bonfire, heating it till it was just a degree below molten, and inside it was water, boiling water.

The pain came from every angle. Not just her skin sizzling and the never-ending drowning, but there was just enough air at the top that if Ragyo were *so* careful maybe she would be able to breathe it, stave off that horrible searing in her lungs. But to push herself up some part of her – hands or feet – would have to touch the metal itself, be burned in a pure searing burst of pain. But if she didn't try to, she'd sink to the bottom and suffer the same pain anyway.

And all along the rotting soreness in her cramped joints that could never, ever stretch was drilling into her until there was nothing else she could think of but *please let it stop!* And it was pitch dark, and the bubbling of the boiling water was all she could hear, and there was nothing outside of the pain. She couldn't know how long it would last, it felt like an eternity every time – by the end she had to *try* to remember who she even was.

It had broken her the very first time.

~~~~~  
August 2067  
~~~~~

“So, dinosaurs,” Satsuki observed.

Ryuko rolled over in her lap, facing up at her. The TV kept blaring music as the credits rolled and she said, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh nothing much. Just that when you said you wanted to watch a nature documentary tonight this isn’t really what I thought you meant. CGI dinosaurs running around.”

“What, dinosaurs’s part of nature, I don’t see the problem. And besides it’s more fun!” Ryuko squirmed ticklishly as Satsuki fished around underneath her for the remote control, which she angled out from under Ryuko’s belly to turn the TV off.

“Okay well for one thing that isn’t true. Second off perhaps they were a part of nature but frankly what we saw on screen is quite horribly inaccurate. Should be more feathers, for one thing.”

“Whaaat? No way! Aw, that is so...”

Satsuki looked concerned; not ruining Ryuko’s fun was worth far more to her than being pedantically correct about some facts she learned years ago, “You know there are some more up-to-date books on the subject if you are curious, it’s quite fascinating.”

Ryuko sat up, “How do you know all this shit anyway?”

“I’m a genius my dear, haven’t you heard?” Satsuki joked, “Aside from which, in order to avoid suspicion when was young I couldn’t just read about politics, coups, human psychology,

other immediately useful things. I cultivated a very, very broad set of interests so people would just assume I was just a diligent little prodigy. Fortunately for me, most things in the world are worth learning about.”

Ryuko stood up, “I’m gonna learn about science and history and shit too, y’know? Houka and Shiro’ve already been great with that but I’ll work on it on my own. And y’know what’s funny, is that the version of myself in Junketsu’s fake life was always a great student. Even though that isn’t real it feels like maybe I can learn from it.” Satsuki beamed at that, and Ryuko said, “But not right now. Now’s shower time: I’m beat after watching you work all day.”

Ryuko hated that she once again felt a little uncomfortable getting undressed. That human instinct to wear clothing was something she’d banished so long ago. But now she yanked her shirt over her head, and it felt like it left an oily film behind it, traced with the feather touches of invisible hands. She could examine herself in the bathroom mirror and see there was nothing wrong, but it didn’t stop the memory from coming to her. It made her shudder, and while that wasn’t such a big deal on its own she couldn’t control it, and knowing that was just too much.

She flung open the door. Steam poured out and Ryuko had Satsuki’s attention quite instantly. Of course she did, she sauntered out topless, not betraying any degree of her discomfort. She leaned over the back of the couch and pressed herself against Satsuki’s back, rubbing her shoulders and planting a little kiss on the back of her head.

“Hey,” She said in that breathy, angelic voice she so rarely used, “I know we never do this, but you wanna shower with me?”

~~~~

“I must admit, I didn’t expect that this would be something you’d want,” Satsuki said as she massaged Ryuko’s shoulders, ran her hands down her back slowly, admiringly. It was tough to even get the words out, pressed against Ryuko’s slick skin as she was in the narrow stall. It was impossible not to feel how she’d immediately, instinctively wrapped her legs around Satsuki’s thigh, pressing their bodies together as though they could pass right into each other and feel every single inch all at once. This wasn’t really a talking kind of situation.

She wanted it to be though, because in her mind being utterly nonchalant and in-tune with Ryuko even in such an overwhelmingly sexy situation would make them as close as any two people could be. Still not close enough, the burning pull in her chest told her.

“Mmm?” Ryuko murmured into her ear. “Ohhh yeah, right there,” She gasped as Satsuki squeezed around the small of her back and her spine gave a little pop.

“This. I thought you might find it a lot, considering...”

Ryuko lifted her head, smiling a warm, sated smile. She said, “No, never. Your hands, they’ve got a pulse, they feel alive,” She picked up one of Satsuki’s hands by the wrist and kissed each of her knuckles in turn before – audaciously, painfully slowly – placing her index finger right in her mouth all while keeping an eye contact that seemed to be cheekily asking “*what’s the matter?*”. Satsuki closed her eyes and moaned at the sensation. Ryuko went on emphatically, “Their hands don’t. But you, you chase them away. Sats, look at me.”

It took a supreme effort of will but Satsuki managed it, and Ryuko asked, “It gets better, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Satsuki nodded, “In time, it does.”

Ryuko smiled and slowly traced her finger’s down the firm muscles of Satsuki’s belly. “I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of this.”

It was all too much for Satsuki. In a flash, she had one of Ryuko’s hands, then and with the full weight of her body pressed her up to the tile wall. She pinned both her hands above her head with one hand around their wrist as the other roughly entered her, and she wondered at the way Ryuko’s curves jiggled at the impact and her chest heaved.

“OhhahHH!” The noise Ryuko made was neither dignified nor intentional but it was extraordinarily adorable. And it brought Satsuki to her senses just enough for a momentary hesitation before Ryuko drew her back in, scrabbling at her wet skin with her legs as she gasped, “No, I’ll never get tired of this.”

She couldn’t possibly be afraid of this kind of rough lovemaking, nor did it hold any association to her memories of Ragyo and Nui. After all, it didn’t hurt her at all. To be wanted so desperately that it turned Satsuki, perfectly composed and elegant Satsuki, into a raging beast made her whole body burn with a crazy, consuming arousal.

The hot water was beginning to run low by the time she could think of anything but Satsuki.

When they had both gotten that out of their system Ryuko nonchalantly resumed washing herself, humming a contented tune. She said, in a more conversational than bedroom-talk manner, “Seriously though, I want you to know you can touch me whenever, do whatever with me you want. That’s how I want it.” Responding to Satsuki’s raised eyebrows she said, “And y’know, I won’t mind either if you’re territorial of me. I guess I’d kinda like that too. People think it’s rude and unhealthy, but it’s just as bad for people who bottle it up too much. Makes ‘em crazy.”

“So long as you aren’t saying you’re gonna invite other women onto my territory just to provoke me.”

Ryuko shook her head, “I just want people to know I’m yours. Hey, by the way, y’know I wanna try? Your hair care routine. Dya think you could show me how you do it?”

~~~~~

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

The years trailed by in Ragyo’s life, and with each passing day she witnessed Ryuko felt more and more ill at ease. Spending forty-six years in someone else’s skin wasn’t that much of a challenge for her, with Junketsu’s fake memories included her own memories of her life felt almost that long. And besides this was her true form, not her human body. There were always tangential trains of thought running away with something entirely else that kept her distracted. So it wasn’t the span of time that was so uncomfortable, but seeing the world through Ragyo’s eyes itself, feeling her every sensation, her every thought.

They were too alike. When the teenaged Ragyo that killed Tora looked in the mirror, it was Ryuko’s own face that looked back, and a body that was very similar too – although a bit taller

and (until she grew into it) lankier. Even their natural hairstyle was the same. Shoulder length, messy and loose. Ragyo's did go white sooner though, shockingly early even for a Kiryuin. By the time she was sixteen it was already greying, and when she was twenty it had gone pure white. People took it as a sign that she was destined for greatness, to finally fulfill the Kiryuin's age old duty, to be the epitome of everything the family stood for. And they weren't wrong.

Ryuko even felt a deep kinship with lots of Ragyo's own feelings. That deep, brain wracking boredom they felt sitting in class, Ryuko knew that well. Only difference was that Ragyo felt it *all the time*. And the first awakening of a strange feeling in their chests when they looked at other women, the creeping feeling that there was something about it that wasn't normal. Finally being shown by someone a little more experienced what that feeling was (in Ragyo's case, Tora). Only difference there being that when Ragyo felt it she couldn't push it down, she was caught in a unstoppable urge to either possess or destroy that creature. And they both loved to fight too. Fighting on even footing was practically the only time a teenage Ragyo got along with anyone.

And the rage too. Ryuko was plenty familiar with that.

But as Ragyo passed Ryuko in age, things began to diverge. She had shaken herself free of Tora, her mother, all forces in her life that could control her. She'd been given the reigns of the largest corporate empire on the face of the planet and vast conspiracy with its claws in every nation, built over not just decades but centuries. And now she would transform it according to her vision. She spent many long hours convening with the primordial life-fiber, letting visions of alien worlds and a cosmos of living threads radiate through her brain. This was when REVOCS became what Ryuko would know it as, a cult focused around the coming judgement day, the promised paradise, and their prophet and goddess, Ragyo.

This was when Soichiro entered the story too. Of course Ragyo had known him before, he was a distant cousin, but this was when she noticed him. A brilliant scientist with three PhDs, known and respected around the world, loyal enough to have played his role in a few assassinations of rivals to Kiryuin power but clever enough to have his own personal resources in the form of patents under a secret assumed name. He'd do.

Of course, Ragyo knew just what to say to him. Tell her she loved him, give him plenty of free time to golf and get high with his few friends, and whenever necessary use the weapon between her legs which had yet to fail her so far. But more than any of those things it was giving him unlimited access to researching the life-fibers that kept him in line. Just the sight of the primordial life-fiber had left him entranced, he could see the raw *potential* this thing represented. Not that she told him the truth, Ragyo correctly surmised that he wasn't the type who would accept her story about destroying the Earth in exchange for never-ending bliss. No, she sold him on a much better line.

Immortality.

That was all it took. "With your mind and my power, we can do it," She told him, grinning at his awe. He was so in love with her. "Our children will live forever. *We* will live forever."

~~~~~

April 2045

~~~~~

The day couldn't come fast enough for Ragyo. Since she'd been granted a vision of immortality, of oneness with the life-fibers, she was nearly as obsessed with it as Soichiro. She was twenty-seven now. For most people that would be the prime of their lives, but to her she was already on the slow, deteriorating route to decay and death. Her metabolism wasn't quite what it had been, every so often there was a vague ache or pain. It was time to abandon this horrible, frail little shell before it got any worse.

"You're sure you want to do this," Soichiro said as she stood upon the altar, the great apparatus and spools above and below her radiating some sort of energy that sent the hairs standing on edge. Around them buzzed flocks of less scientists – priests really, though even they were still learning to think of themselves that way – and along the long causeway that lead to the altar's suspended platform stood her couturière guard – an all women order of holy paladins, loyalty ensured to her and nobody else through years of ceaseless brainwashing. She took the time to memorize this room, the roughly egg shaped open pit of machinery the altar hung in the center of, the terminals and brilliant floodlights around it. *My delivery chamber. Where I'll be freed of this cocoon and the real me will be born.*

"We could always find a test subject, you know."

Ragyo laughed, "And have some scum of the masses be the first to venture into the realm of godhood? I think not. It has to be me."

Soichiro smiled worshipfully, "So glad we agree."

*What a useful pawn he's been. Oh, the surprise on his face when I open his guts will be priceless. In a few moments I won't need him anymore. Our children will be immortal, I can't believe he fell for it. What use would a goddess have for children?*

The procedure which was used on Ragyo was far from refined. Her entire back was slit open, huge metal stents placed around her spine, and she hung there howling. The force of will, the sheer fury as she bit her tongue out and thrashed all about even before and life-fibers had been injected into her. She truly believed it would be just a moment more, just the merest instant more pain to be endured and then it would all be *perfect*. And then the life-fibers were injected.

Ryuko didn't remember her own hybridization, but she couldn't imagine it went like this. Something in Ragyo, not of her corporeal body, lurched into action. Her soul, that piece of the human body which Ryuko could see in multidimensional space, that grounded them to the rest of the living world, it was been snipped away and it reacted the same way her immune system would to a foreign virus, but much more severe.

Fountains of blood and bone as her body ripped itself apart and was remade, organs peeling off to dive off the altar and vaporize in the machinery below. She was blindly insensate to everything except the agony of it even as he body twisted and contracted into unnatural shapes, bulging pallid growths reshaping themselves into new limbs. And yet, somehow in that maelstrom, Ragyo could still feel the life-fibers calling out to her.

*I-It's not working. I'm dying.* She realized. *No, no it's not that I'm dying. They're coming in, reshaping my insides to house them. Soon I'll be all hollowed out, just a puppet for them to work their will through.* The moment she realized it she understood how correct that was, how perfect. *A higher being will see through my eyes. I have given them everything, power and followers and technology. And now I give them my body. It was hubris to think I would be free to*

*receive my reward but... to give host to them is a greater reward than I could have ever imagine. In her last moments there was nothing but love and gratitude for the parasite overtaking her.*

Then her mind unfolded. Honestly this part didn't impress Ryuko much, she'd seen it all and more before. The fleshy fabric of her soul swelling bloated to abominable size, being freed from the bound of space and time, seeing the universe as it really was. But when Ragyo returned to Earth eons had passed for her, witnessing the growth and birth of life and civilizations on a thousand planets, all ending in consumption by her – by the thing she was now just a part of. Stars coalescing and exploding, galaxies torn asunder by black holes.

The cold of the metal walkway was shockingly vivid. Smoke clung to the air, coursed through with lights that refracted off the little particles and created an unearthly effect. Her fingers were slick with blood. But the pain was gone.

Everything was gone. The guilt over what she'd done to Tora, the misery of not understanding what it was that bound the rest of humanity together. She was something much greater now.

She heard them call out to her, heard them gasp as she stood. All that light, it was pouring from her, bulging out under her skin.

*“MmHmHm**Hahahaha!**”*

She understood everything now. She was their puppet, but yet being theirs was no slavery. She was free.

*Free.*

*“**AAAAHAHAHAHAHA!**”*

~~~~~

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

Of course, she wasn't free. Ryuko had expected there would be whispers, tempting her, instructing her. But instead it was more like with Junketsu. To life-fibers even the human brain was an entirely predictable thing, and hers was remapped to ensure every behavior was ideal. There was no outside will moving her, Ragyo felt - *was deluded* into thinking - that the motions of her body were hers, that her thoughts were hers. She was a puppet, not a trained creature, she needed no carrot nor no stick to do their bidding. That not much of her behavior changed was something she was given the privilege of feeling great pride in. It only meant she had been following their will perfectly for a very long time.

But there was one way her behavior had been altered. She didn't kill Soichiro. She needed him now, for the life-fibers had instilled in her an urge she'd never felt before. Maybe it was their real reward for the service she had rendered.

*She needed to create someone to spend eternity with.*

Ryuko had witnessed many terrible things, felt many sickening, atrocious, psychopathic thoughts while living through Ragyo's life.

But the worst thing she had ever felt was the moment when Ragyo's love for Satsuki died.

The time when Ragyo was carrying her was like the sun bursting through the clouds. For the first time... ever, when Ragyo woke up and saw how her body had grown overnight she felt *happy*. Ryuko watched with her the entire time (call it morbid curiosity but she kinda wanted to know what it was like) and found now she wasn't repulsed by Ragyo's feelings, but she shared them. Maternal instinct was warm and powerful, and the life-fibers seemed content to let it through. After all a second immortal human serving them was hardly a bad thing by their logic. After a certain while Ryuko stopped even trying to remind herself this was Satsuki who was growing inside a body she could feel as though it was her own. After all, Satsuki was human, this is how humans got made. Why should she, not fully human, shy away from it?

But knowing it was Satsuki she couldn't help but feel dread, like though this might have been a blissful respite there was simply no way it ended well. She'd already seen how it ended after all.

But the delivery came and went (not as painful for hybrids as Ryuko had always heard) and Ragyo's feelings were only intensified. For almost a year Soichiro worked round the clock to take this precocious little creature (she learned to crawl and even hobble around far sooner than expected) and make her into a new goddess, and Ragyo came close to taking time off from her grand designs just to bask in one of the simplest pleasures in life. Not that she actually did any of the work, that's what governesses were for, but still. She even started to warm up towards Soichiro, she knew this wouldn't have been possible without him and there was almost something like grudging respect towards him. *One level above the rest of the slime, really quite an accomplishment for a human.*

And then came the day.

*Connect error.*

"It's not working. Apparently one year is too old. I'll have to use this one now."

Just like that it was all gone. She looked at this adorable, bright eyed child who'd been her world for nearly two years now and *felt nothing*. No hate, no anger, no sadness. Nothing. Satsuki might as well have been a worm writhing on the sidewalk, too beneath her notice to even deserve stomping out. And that wasn't the life-fibers doing. That was just good old Ragyo.

And the worst thing was she didn't even feel any loss. But Ryuko did.

~~~~~

Ryuko retracted her razor from Ragyo's brain and dropped unceremoniously to her knees.

"What's wrong?" Senketsu was suddenly at her side, trying to help her up.

Ryuko clutched at her belly, eyes a million miles away. "No..."

"Wait! Don't go back to Earth yet what should I do with —,"



~~~~~  
August 2067  
~~~~~

“Ryuko I thought I heard you come out here, were just off with Senketsu?” Satsuki came out the door into their yard to find Ryuko in a heap, heaving sobs into her chest as her fingers tightened around something in her middle that wasn’t there. “Oh my God, Ryuko what happened? Ryuko I’m here, it’s okay!”

Ryuko barely even seemed to process her presence as she scooped her up in her arms, held her and shielded her eyes from the sunset. Finally, she looked up and managed to choke out. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry.”

It was dark by the time she had recovered. Satsuki had seen her come back in a foul mood a few times, no doubt for Ragyo related reasons. This one was particularly bad, and she doubted whether she should even ask.

Ryuko sniffled and said, “I have to go back. I’ll be okay, I promise.”

“I know you will. Please just. Come back to me in a better shape next time, please? I can’t take another scare like that.”

Another sniffle, “Okay. Sats? You-you should know. She loved you. By the time me and Nui came along it was too late, but for a little while there she did love you. And then she remembered who she was.”

~~~~~  
UNDEFINED  
~~~~~

“You know I should be thanking you, honestly,” She said to Ragyo in the alley. Every time they returned there the shadows grew darker, and Ryuko more radiant. Now she burned like the sun, her fury amplifying everything until the whole world was just her and the darkness. “Because I was always worried, y’know? I can feel it building up inside when I get angry, this feeling like I might do something horrible. I nearly did once, I went berserk the first time Nui showed her face around me. You remember Nui, don’t you? I’ll make you hate her yet. Next time you come outta the orb I’ll wear her face, I’m sure you get a kick outta that.”

“No, no you can’t! I-I am but yo-your humble servant! Please!”

“No, you shut up, I’ll do whatever with you I like, *never* forget that. But I was worried, that you and me shared that... poison in us, maybe it was genes or maybe it was just the life-fibers making us think we can do whatever the fuck we want. But that’s not it. *You were broken from the start,*” The words dribbled from Ryuko’s mouth. “So now I don’t have to worry anymore. You were born a monster, and I might not be perfect but I sure ain’t that. So thanks. It’s a load off my mind.”

Ragyo spawled on the ground, pale flesh shaking. Every fiber of her being knew only escaping from the brass orb, that was all she could think possibly think of. She didn't even really understand what Ryuko was talking about. The sheer terror was almost painful on its own. And the flashes of that face... she couldn't even tell if it was Tora or Satsuki they looked so alike. Sorrow was a strange kind of terror too, one she'd never known before.

The look on Ryuko's face was inscrutable. Ragyo said, "I-I am happy to serve you, m-my lady?"

Nothing on Ryuko's expression changed, but without a single moment hesitation the orb was there, hovering over its fire. Ragyo only had a second to soundlessly express her utter horror before she was abruptly transported inside it.

~~~~~

August 2067

~~~~~

"Want a refill Mako?"

"Mhm! It's deee-lish!" Mako exclaimed as Ryuko passed over the bowl of dumplings from which Mako fished out a quite a generous portion.

"Oughta be, it's Mom's recipe!" Ryuko replied, happily finishing off her own pair of dumplings (any more than that and she'd start feeling full, which was no good) yet.

"I know I shouldn't be concerned, your appetite is as famous as it is... medically inexplicable Mako, but I hope you don't fill up too much on the appetizers," Satsuki breezed over from the grill, carrying a platter on which sat not just a tremendous pork shoulder but also a complement of grilled seafood and vegetables around it.

"What a heavenly aroma!" Soroi commented as she set it down on the patio table. Satsuki beamed, and Ryuko felt a rush of happiness seeing it. It had been too long since they'd had Soroi over, hot water in the guest bedroom still being broken and all.

"We can only hope it tastes as good," She said modestly. "Well enjoy."

And they did, eating mostly in silence for a few minutes until Soroi warmly said, "You've outdone yourselves, both you. My compliments to our two lovely chefs."

"Ahh, what're ya talking about," Ryuko sheepishly rubbed the back of her head. "I'm a trainwreck when it comes to cooking you know that. It's all Satsuki."

"Nonsense," Satsuki said, "What about the sangria? Do we not have you to thank for that?"

Ryuko ruffling her hair provoked Mako to notice it and she said, "Oh *wow*, Ryuko your hair is so beautiful today! So silky and full, it's shiny! How'd ya do it?"

"Oh, I dunno, just been looking after it a bit better lately," Ryuko said with a conspiratorial look at Satsuki. No sense telling them how long it had taken to comb out all the snarls. But now, though the overall shape of her hairstyle was unchanged, in consistency and luster

it was exactly as improved as Mako said. Exactly like Satsuki's. A subtle little sign, maybe just for the two of them, but it made Ryuko feel so happy nonetheless.

*Look at this. Look at what I get to enjoy. Maybe Satsuki was right, if I am just like Ragyo then I'm her but functional, the way she was meant to be. And that's why I won. Why I broke her, and even though she gave as good as she got, I'll never be afraid of her again.*

*Yeah I guess it's true,* Ryuko let it sink in with a certain satisfaction as she watched the sun setting over her loved ones gathered at her home, not quite how she'd always imagined it but better even. *I win, always and forever.*

NOTE: In reference to that remark about Ryuko and Ragyo having similar hair, in case you never saw the OVA with I think the oldest flashback of Ragyo we get.



## Chapter End Notes

Oh boy oh man oh boy oh man!

Again, one of the chapters I've been planning from the very beginning. I spent time on this I really shoulda spent on other things this week, but what the hell I just was so excited to get it out into the world.

# Modern Royalty

## Chapter Summary

Just a fun lil chapter with the girls. Was supposed to be the first half of the next chapter but life got in the way of all my writing time so screw it, I like it the way it is.

August 2067

~~~~~

~ *“People of Japan, the last recount from the inner Tokyo districts is in. We now have the official tally of the final vote,”* ~ The newscaster, the very same one who Ryuko had years ago interrupted live on the air (his name was Kenji, she recalled), spoke as quickly as he could. He was trying to stay solemn and serious, but it was hard. ~ *“Ahem. By a nearly unanimous majority, Ryuko Matoi is now Queen and Eternal Protector of Japan.”* ~

The was an almost audible release of tension across the council room. Everyone’s eyes were immediately on Ryuko. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat as all the seasoned governors, generals, leaders and power brokers who filled the council cracked jubilant smiles and congratulated her quite sincerely on abruptly becoming their superior.

*Well, this is it idiot,* She thought to herself, *No turning back now.* Satsuki noticed this brief cloud of last-minute hesitancy and took her hand with a concerned glance.

But it was only momentary and Ryuko smiled back and said the most appropriate thing that came to mind: “Thank you. I look forward to working with you. This is, uh, this is gonna be good. Yeah, I’ll make you all proud to call me your Queen.”

~ *“Along with this title come corresponding titles for her family. Sadly, with her father passed and both his parents dead as well nothing is known about any surviving relatives on the Matoi side of her family. Her maternal uncle Tsumugu Kinagase and his wife Aoi Kinagase will be known as Prince Tsumugu and Princess Aoi. Her grandparents Nadai and Sadako Kinagase will receive the titles of count and countess, and the extended family will receive honorifics as well. But that isn’t all, Her adopted family, the Mankanshokus, will be ennobled too. Her adopted Mother and Father, Sukuyo and Barazo Mankanshoku, receive the titles of count and countess, and her siblings Mako and Mataro Mankanshoku are now known as Princess Mako and Prince Mataro. This also includes honorifics for their extended family as well.”* ~

It was standing room only in the council room today, in fact the big table had been removed in favor of a couple smaller ones and it still wasn’t enough with all the extra officials who had come. Mako and Mataro were there too, and their eyes practically dropped out of their heads when they saw pictures of themselves behind the newscaster. “No. Way. You weren’t joking!” Mako gasped.

“I... guess I wasn’t.”

Next to her, Ira leaned up against the wall talking to Uzu. “Well, that’s it. A necessary arrangement. One can only hope it doesn’t make our get-togethers into formal affairs.”

“Ah, don’t look so glum man,” Uzu prodded him with his elbow, “You’re dating a princess now, after all. You gotta admit that’s pretty sick.”

“Oh? And what am I to you, chopped liver?” Nonon chirped as she leaned over from next to Uzu.

“Sorry *Lady* Nonon,” Uzu responded as he put an arm around her shoulders, “Guess that’s just not enough anymore now that there’s princesses around. Seriously though, I feel like I should be congratulating you more than Ryuko. The plan worked; you were right.”

“Yeah go ahead if you want, but it’s just what had to be done, nothing to get excited about.”

“What, are you getting second-hand angry for Rei now? She looks fine,” Which was true, Rei wasn’t at all distressed, and they could all feel that from Furashada. She was quite animatedly talking to the general who was in charge of the regular troops on the Korean front, discussing how they could curb the religious zealotry of the people there, which Rei was slowly coming under the impression was a big problem. Making the best of a bad situation, just like the rest of them.

~ “*Now, this is not just a symbolic title, as you may know,*” ~ The newscaster went on. There were other larger screens around showing more official government feeds with the vote results. Honestly, they’d all known for a couple hours that Ryuko was going to “win”. But until she heard it on the actual news, Ryuko couldn’t bring herself to fully believe it. ~ “*Not only does it correspond to the crown of Indonesia, placing us in an alliance with that nation, it also comes with privileges, rights, and responsibilities. This includes the authority to control the military in states of national emergency, the ability to call congress to an immediate vote, and...*” ~

*He doesn’t say whether he thinks this is good or bad, Ryuko noted, I wonder what he really thinks. Did he vote for me? Or was he one of the 4% of the population who thinks this is all a new form of tyranny? She briefly entertained that idea and thought, All I can do is prove him wrong.*

At this point Nonon and the Prime Minister came over and she and Satsuki had a brief discussion about the whens and wheres of the coronation ceremony. She nodded along and said “yeah, sounds good” where it seemed appropriate and let Satsuki do most of the talking. It was astounding to her how excited the Prime Minister seemed, and she thought of what Satsuki had said when she asked why people were so supportive of this. “*This is a chance for them to say thank you. Most people never really got that because you’ve lived a very private life since Honnouji. Even though it’s long delayed, they haven’t forgotten.*”

So bearing that in mind, once they had everything agreed on Ryuko decided to try something, just to see how far she could push that. She asked the Prime Minister, “Hey, could you do me a favor? Could you get everyone out of here so I can talk to the Kamui Corps and my family in private for a sec?”

“Absolutely, your – uh – your majesty. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

She shared a worried look with Satsuki when he actually did just that. And when it was just them, Nonon, Ira, Uzu, Rei, and Mako and Mataro in the room she said, “Okay, this is too

weird already.”

There wasn't a single one of them that disagreed. They sat around the table with serious looks on their faces. As much of the inner circle as could be gathered, given that Houka and Shiro were holding down the Korean front and Aikuro and Tsumugu were pursuing the fleeing REVOCS army from Australia up past the Indonesian ash cloud towards the mainland. She could feel this tremendous shift from the Kamui as the gravity of the situation settled in on them. Trying to figure out what their actual mood was though, that was a bit trickier. *Please, please, I need to know if they still respect me. If they still love me.*

“Alright, hit me with it,” She sighed, knowing that they weren't going to do what she wanted – what would make sense – and yell at her for what a stupid decision she'd just made.

Instead Ira solemnly said, “Thank you for doing this. I can't imagine it's easy, we've all been in positions that felt too big for us, it never is. But at this point I have to believe it'll work out.”

“You can still say no, if you really want,” Nonon added.

“Nah, I'm ready for it,” Ryuko answered, “The people have spoken, honestly I'm *floored* by how unanimous it was, but it makes me feel better. It's *you* guys who matter here. Look, I know we're not all here, but cards on the table. Rei, I cheated on you. And I'm in love with my biological sister – we've all had that conversation before. And *now* I've basically taken my Mom's old spot on top, and that makes me all of your boss. 'Cept Mako. I fucked up. Now I *know* you're not okay with this, but this is just how it is. And I need you all with me. Or I'll never be able to deal with being Queen. I have no right to say it, but we're all closer than blood now. I'm at your mercy.”

“Ryuko-,” Satsuki started, but Ryuko cut her off.

“No Sats, just because I'm Queen now doesn't mean I'm gonna throw that around. Not with *us*. So, what'll it take? Name your price, I'm serious.”

She could practically feel Furashada rising to the breaking point. Paralyzed between still trying to believe she was a good person, hating themselves for wanting to forgive her even after everything, and yet also knowing for certain that she would ruin this all. She wasn't experienced, hell, wasn't smart enough to lead a country let alone two! Ryuko couldn't parse all that just from Furashada's aura, but she could feel the plain and simple jealousy and contempt for Satsuki radiating off her. *I doubt there's a thing I could do to convince her Satsuki isn't running me like a puppet. Holy shit, I gotta make sure she **doesn't** run me, because I know for sure her suggestions will sound like good ideas and she'll be the real power behind the throne without even meaning to!*

“I want a raise,” Nonon blurted.

“Wha-I mean I guess-wait, what?”

“Yeah, I feel like I deserve it. I just think, y'know, if you really are committed to keeping us all close, that spreading the wealth around would be a good way to show it. You can check my statements; I'm not nearly as loaded as my family used to be.”

Ryuko nodded, “Okay. Done.”

“Oh! And I get to compose all the music for your official ceremonies and stuff!”

“Hah! I was gonna have you do that anyway!” Ryuko laughed, “Now, anyone else?”

There was a moment of silence before Ira said, “Actually, there is one thing. A few of my family’s heirlooms recently went up to auction. My grandfather had to sell them off to keep the metalworks afloat in the unrest of 2034 and I never thought they would resurface from whatever private collection they were in. I might be *just* able to buy them back, but-.”

“Say no more. You could’ve come to me at any time about that, you know.”

“Alright, well how about this one,” Uzu said, “No secret at this point that you’ve started making a kamui for Mataro. Well I want you to make another one. You remember Yuda Uwais, right?”

“Oh, yeah sure I do. He seemed alright.”

“He’s been a real help, as well as being a great martial artist. Right Nonon?”

“I wouldn’t say no to it. If we’re gonna expand, no better place to start.”

“Ah, yeah I can see it,” This wasn’t what Ryuko expected, and she answered somewhat hesitantly. “Thing about that is though it’s kind of up to him. Like, I think I’ll have to interview him and also he’ll have to train – well, you know how hard – to make sure his body’s up to the strain.”

“That’s fine, fair, yeah. But give him a shot?”

“Sure. Okay, anything else? Mako, Mataro, Rei?”

“I wanna move out of our parents’,” Mataro jumped in. “Maybe I can live at your penthouse?”

“You can’t go off living on your own!” Mako protested, “You’re only sixteen!”

“Well, it wouldn’t be alone like 40 people live there!”

Ryuko held up her hand, “I mean you can just have the penthouse, I’m probably moving out of there. Someone’s taken the master bedroom, but you can work that out I’m sure.”

“You’re going? Where?” Mataro’s face fell.

“The lake house,” Ryuko answered simply. “Seemed more queenly, plus Sats really likes it up there.”

Mataro took a moment to weigh the options – proximity to Ryuko or a swanky penthouse to call his own. “Can I have a room at the lake house too then?”

“ ‘Course!” Ryuko grinned. But then her face fell as she detected that Rei’s mood, despite an outward calm, was only increasing in agitation.

*[What are we, gangsters?] Furashada suddenly asked, [Crowding around the scent of power, looking for favors? You should all feel ashamed.]* It fell very pointedly at Ryuko,

considering this had been her idea.

Ryuko froze. “What did you say?” She let out a thin, incredulous laugh that belied a sudden flash of exasperation.

Furashada flinched, but Rei didn’t, “We mean it too.”

“I am *trying* to make amends here!”

“Oh yeah? Well then why don’t you worry about doing right by the people who elected you, I think that’s what I’ll ask from you!” Rei said as she stood and breezed out.

“Well good! I’m gonna!” Ryuko shouted and managed to get it in before she shut the door. She sighed and said, “Okay. I’m, uh, well I’m sorry about that. So, um, anyway, what about you Mako? What do you think of all this?”

Mako had been sitting quietly with her hand on her chin, making a little worried noise as she thought. “I don’t know.”

“Mako, it’s *really* important to me you’re okay with this. If there’s anything I can do, anything at all...”

Mako shook her head, “I just don’t know...”

“Well, do you wanna talk about it alone?”

~~~~~

Ryuko’s intuition about Mako was rarely wrong. Alone with Ryuko (even Satsuki had been sent to wait in the hall) she seemed a little more at ease. “So, what’s on your mind?”

“Oh, I dunno,” She hummed, fidgeting with her hands on her elbows, “I didn’t think you meant this was really gonna happen even though you told me.”

“Yeah, that’s my bad. I couldn’t really believe it either, guess I did kinda downplay the whole thing” Ryuko chuckled.

“Are you really gonna have a whole coronation and everything? You are, aren’t you? No way!”

“Mako. Are you *actually* excited about all this? C’mon, you can tell me.”

“Oh, oh alright fine! I guess not really,” Mako huffed. “Ryuko why’s this really all happening, is it really about what they’re saying, with the volcano? There’s nothing else going on?”

“Yeah, it really is. It’s totally nuts I know, but it doesn’t have to be this way if you don’t want it to. I’m serious, if you don’t think you can live like this it can all go away.”

“No, don’t be crazy.”

“I’m serious,” Ryuko said, “I’m Queen, so that means if I decided today I didn’t wanna be anymore there’s nobody above me who can tell me I’m not allowed to do that.”



Mako thought about it a bit and said, "I'm not gonna make you do that."

"Good," Ryuko stood and came around the table to sit next to her, pulling her close so their knees were pressed together. She took Mako's hands and said, "I just don't want you to worry that this's gonna change me, okay. I'll always be your Ryuko, I want you to know that."

Mako smiled, "You're such a dummy. Of course I know that. That's not it at all. It's the other thing, all these titles and stuff for the rest of us. You're doing the thing again, the fight club thing."

"Fight club thing?"

"Yeah. I mean, you do what you need to do, you wouldn't be Ryuko if you didn't. But trying to bring us Mankanshokus with you is just like the fight club, with you trying to get us a better life, with all these things and all this money that we don't need, and that doesn't suit us. And I know you only do it because you love us, but all it ever did was drive us further apart."

"This won't be anything like that. We're grown people now, and we've learned our lesson. All of this'll only make us closer than ever. I was even thinking of inviting Mom and Dad to come live in the lake house with me and Sats and I guess now Mataro too. You and Ira could even come if you like! It's huge, half a palace really."

"Honestly? I'm not really worried about Mom and Dad or even really Mataro. Although it'll probably go to his head a little bit, knowing him."

"It's you," Ryuko concluded.

"Ryuko, I'm not a princess," Mako said insistently. "*You're* a princess, Satsuki's a princess, you've got that – oh, I don't know. That way about you. I'm just a normal girl. I don't deserve this."

"Mako..." Ryuko thought she might cry at that, "You know, I was feeling that same way, not too long ago. Want to hear what Senketsu said?"

"Mhm?"

"'Make it work for you'. That's it. Like, what do you want it to mean? How can you use it to make you happy? It doesn't have a mind of its own, it's not gonna make you do anything. You don't have to live in a huge palace, go to stuffy balls, wear puffy dresses all the time, act like you're so special and above everyone. *You* don't have to worry about what other people think a princess should look like, what a princess should do. You *are* a princess now. It goes the other way, you don't have to conform to any meaning of that word. You're what it means. Do you get me?"

"Princess Mako..." She murmured wonderingly as though trying it out.

"See? And do you feel any different?"

"No?"

"Exactly."

“Ryukooo, that doesn’t make any sense!” Mako exclaimed, “That just means the title doesn’t mean anything!”

“Well that’s one way to look at it. I like to think of it a different way. Remember how way back when were still living at Mom and Dad’s I was getting so freaked out because our scientists buddies just dropped it on me that I existed partially in another dimension? You remember what you said to me? You said none of that mattered, because I was still me, your Ryuko, and that’s all that mattered. Well now I’m telling you that you’re still Mako, *my* Mako, and that hasn’t changed. So now ‘Princess’ is just another word for Mako. Whaddya think a’ that?”

To Ryuko’s surprise, Mako’s response was to giggle and plant a swift kiss on her cheek. When her mouth opened in surprise Mako said, “You know, every day I think to myself how lucky I am I met you. Right when I send you your good morning text, that’s when I think it. I can’t believe you remembered that!”

“C’mere,” Ryuko pulled her onto her lap and squeezed her tight, “I’m so lucky I met you too. C’mon now, let’s do this together, alright? Because I sure as hell ain’t gonna get lonely at the top.”

~~~~~

September 2067

~~~~~

After the fighting in Korea had dragged on into the rugged mountains of what was formerly North Korea for a few months, Nonon had decided that the rest of the mainland invasion force was up to speed with prosecuting the war without her. So she and Saiban were much more comfortable flying themselves back and forth across the strait for a weekend or a day here or there to attend a strategy meeting or some high-class socialite function of political significance or record music or just sleep in her own bed. It was almost getting to be like having a day job.

And increasingly the thing she was most looking forward to doing in Japan was meeting with Satsuki in her apartment to plan Ryuko’s coronation.

The venue was something of a challenge to decide on. Stadiums or amphitheaters wouldn’t do, they didn’t feel special enough. And temples and historical buildings each had their own associations that it wouldn’t do to tie Ryuko to too closely. One early idea was to hold the coronation in either the Tokyo or Kyoto Imperial Palaces, but they were *Imperial*. A very, very bad look.

And besides, they weren’t big enough. In fact, after a while Nonon was close to saying, “fuck it, I don’t care if it’s a Christian church so long as there’s a pretty building that can fit everyone, we’ll take it”. But none of them could hold foreign dignitaries from all across the world and thousands of reverent onlookers, and then a sprawling reception party afterward.

Something completely new would have to be built. And the only major city with enough space for something on that scale was Osaka. Of course it had enough space, the whole city had been levelled not that long ago. Since then it had become something of a special victory of the new government; the efficiency with which the rubble was cleared out and new buildings were rising. Sure, most of the square mileage of the city was still bulldozed wasteland, utterly flat weed-filled lots, but the city center looked like something from a science fiction movie. Sleek, curved

buildings coated with solar panels with tree encrusted parks on their roofs, surrounded by cranes that pulled more sturdy towers up at a pace that would've been impossible just a few decades ago. A symbol of rebuilding, shooting for a promising new future. And now it would have a new centerpiece.

The building being constructed on the waterfront was not quite a palace, not quite a temple, but without a doubt it was a *behemoth*. Modern construction meeting traditional architecture. Towering walls of sleek concrete carved with beveled ridges and faults, dyed and painted a brilliant white. Huge wooden gates swinging open onto a central pavilion wider than an Olympic stadium, surrounded by red and gold buildings in traditional style that boasted airy, open walkways and stretched all the way up in layers and steps from the ground level twelve stories to the walls and even further up in the huge complex that stretched seaward in the back. Pagoda towers erupted from it amidst the winding stairways and terraces, and the interior was threaded through with a seemingly never-ending series of huge halls and winding corridors, each appointed their own theme of color and décor.

From the top of that multi-story, palacelike complex on the seaward side there flowed a huge fountain, more a man-made waterfall, fell into a wide pond surrounded by gardens, in the center of which there was a raised, rounded dais on which the ceremony proper would occur. The structure was so large, not nearly eclipsing Honnouji in sheer scale but far more visually complex, that the eye couldn't take enough in to create a sense of order unless it was viewed from the air or from the very highest balcony.

After the coronation, this was not fated to become Ryuko's palace or anything so banal. No, it was more like a temple, though to no particular denomination. Restaurants and lodgings and even shops were set up in the never-ending, dreamlike maze of its interior. Museum displays of many priceless artifacts and artworks would eventually find their way inside as well, including even an indoor zoo and an aquarium. With its gates always open, it was more like a national monument than anything else, and as the museum displays grew to take on more and more international pieces it began to earn its name, the "Human Heritage Monument". Of course, that wasn't what it was colloquially called though.

In conversation it was called simply "The Monument". But the people of Osaka stubbornly, proudly, kept calling it "Ryuko's Palace".

Not that Nonon and Satsuki knew all that would happen as they pored over maps of it, trying to plan where every country's representatives were going to be placed, what the timing of each piece of ceremony would be, and all those other little details that would matter for one crucial hour and then never again.

"Have you given any thought to the reception, by the way?" Nonon asked as their work wound down for the day.

"I delegated the food and décor and you're doing the music and seating charts, so I wouldn't say particularly so. Why?"

"Well, it's just it's going to be the first time you and Ryuko will be seen at a party like this as a couple."

"Oh! You're right!" Satsuki burst with nervous excitement, and it tickled Nonon to see her so flustered, "What do I do?"

“What do you do?”

“Well, yes, I suppose so. I really never considered this,” Satsuki said in a tone between overjoyed and totally flustered that convinced Nonon she seriously never had, “But there’s things one must do in that situation, aren’t there?”

“Hey, it’s nothing to get all frighty about. I’m sure you’ve seen people do it a million times.”

“Well yes, but-”

“-Here, I’ll tell you what *I’d* do. You make sure she meets all the right people, though I guess at this point it’s more them meeting her. You make sure she dances at least once, and you laugh at all her jokes. And above all, you stick to her arm like glue, okay? That’s how a couple appearing for the first time should be. Oh, and your clothes obviously have to match, but then Ryuko’s probably taking care of your whole wardrobe so I expect that’ll be handled.”

“She is. Oh! Do you want to see what she’s made for herself? Her royal vestments! They’re really something,” In a flash Satsuki had her phone out and was calling up pictures.

“Sure, why not,” Nonon said, in spite of herself enjoying this girl time with Satsuki. It was neat how when Satsuki had her guard down, she could gossip and gush and get flustered or annoyed like a normal woman. At first not so much, but she had adapted herself to the more casual, emphatic way most people talked as naturally as if that’s what she was meant to do. Nonon gasped when Satsuki passed her phone over. “Holy shit! A Goku Uniform!”

And that is what it looked an awful lot like to Nonon’s trained eye. She could pick up on that smooth, synthetic texture of life-fiber clothing easily. It had to be Goku uniform because it covered way more skin than the newer, more revealing Ultima models and obviously wasn’t a Kamui – no eyes.

“No, not quite. It is made of life-fibers but there’s something special about them. Care to try and guess?”

“It can’t be a new form to house Senketsu in. Can it?”

“I’m afraid that’s not it either. It’s made from her own life-fibers,” Satsuki said proudly.

“Whoa... I had no idea that was possible.”

“Neither did she,” Satsuki hum-chuckled. “That’s why she thought it was worth a shot. It even gives her a weaker version of the energy field your kamui provide, so she can take some shots without bleeding everywhere now.”

“Well not like she needs it,” was Nonon’s snide response

Satsuki looked right at her and said in a rather soft voice, “She did that for me.”

“What does that-,”

“-Nevermind. So, what do you think of it?”

Nonon inspected the photos for the first time, shots of the outfit on both a mannequin and Ryuko's body. Ryuko's "royal vestments" were at once old-fashioned and on the experimental-runway side of modern, and yet also very her. Brilliant, flaming orange-red was the primary color, most obvious on the short cutoff-jacket that only went down to the hourglass curve of her bare midriff, below which was a matching blousy top with two rows of buttons and huge, deep collars. The jacket too had big collars and coupled with a loose tie the effect was (and was very much meant to be) evocative of Senketsu's powered-down form. And likewise, the short pleated skirt in black and orange-red also paid a sort of homage.

However, underneath it loose pants like the kind of hakama samurai used to wear under their armor were tucked into tall high-heel boots just a bit below her knees, and the belt that held it up was gaudy and gold and tended to fall at a jaunty kind of angle. Her shoulders and sleeves seemed likewise to take inspiration from history, long and flowing as though they belonged on a kimono with huge, flowing sleeves that draped down several feet and strangely seemed to have a different pattern on them in each picture Nonon saw. And to cap it off she wore a necklace – well no, a chain, with a huge sapphire on it the same color as her eyes. It was an arresting sight and without question more refined than her previous ensembles – much less gaudy, content to be simple where simplicity was ideal.

"Ach, too much gold." Nonon grunted.

"Oh, you spoilsport," Satsuki waved a dismissive hand at her as she hum-chuckled, "I think it looks great."

"Yeah, I can see that," Nonon said as she kept flicking through pictures of Ryuko modelling her new... well, it seemed wrong but it was more like a new organ than a piece of clothing to Saiban's eyes. There were lots of pictures, anyway, of a wide variety of sitting, standing, and reclining poses. Some far more sensual in nature than Nonon cared to look at, others just silly. "You guys had fun with this."

"Can you blame us?"

Eventually though Satsuki came upon the end of them and onto another one, of a simple silver-white necklace with a huge black opal, polished and rounded into a teardrop, swirling with red and blue like flames inside it. The blue perfectly matched the sapphire that completed Ryuko's ensemble. "Oh wow," Nonon said appreciatively.

"She got that for me," Satsuki practically purred.

"Jesus, that's incredible. I didn't think they made stones like that anymore."

"Well, I didn't think to ask where she got it from. Or how much for."

"Uh-huhhhh. Hey, speaking of gemstones, you guys given any more thought to the crown situation?"

"Oh goodness, have we ever. Well, to start with we definitely ruled out anything that's sort of a standard crown. Nothing eastern, certainly nothing western. A big hat with jewels in it, to use Ryuko's words, isn't really in keeping with her style."

"What about the whole Amaterasu angle?" Nonon asked. The idea of tying Ryuko to the sun god in terms of visual symbology was definitely what people expected, the idea that she was

some living embodiment of that deity, or maybe of all the various sun gods remembered and forgotten around the world, was popular with a certain sect and compared to a lot of the other apocalyptic interpretations surrounding her it was actually pretty tame. If the association could be made on a more symbolic than literal level that might really ground Matoism in something people already understood. It would allow the more philosophic, less religious angle of Shinto-buddhism to be what her believers were interested in.

“We aren’t super in favor of a halo design either. Ryuko’s ‘kisaragi wings’ take care of that look enough anyway. It would come off as too self-aggrandizing. No, I think Ryuko really started to like the idea of just a simple laurel crown. Well, not laurels, that has the empire connotations, and at this point as you know we really can’t go against our message that, y’know, ‘we haven’t conquered anybody we just happen to have the same monarch as this other independent nation’. We thought about chrysanthemums since that’s the national flower but again, that’s putting Japan first too much.”

“So what did you go with?”

Satsuki smiled, “Oh, you’ll see. I think you’ll like it too – Oh!” Satsuki suddenly cut herself off as her phone started buzzing. “Ryuko,” She said to Nonon and answered, “Yes dear?”

~ “Sats! You still over at Nonon’s?” ~ Ryuko yelled.

“Yes, I am. You sound like you’re in a hurry, why is it so windy where you are? Is everything alright?”

~ “Oh yeah, fine, no worries. But something just happened and I – well I was gonna save it as a surprise for the coronation, but I just can’t resist showing ya! Don’t. Go. Anywhere.”~

“As you command,” Satsuki quipped as the call ended. “Well that was strange.”

“Right? And here I was hoping you knew what the fuck got into her this time,” Nonon said. “Holy shit, you don’t think she’s gonna ask you to marry her at the coronation, do you?”

The look on Satsuki’s face was priceless. “No! She wouldn’t, but – It would be just like her and what on Earth would I do if she does?”

“Hahaha! Oh man Satsuki, you’re so in love with her!” Nonon laughed.

“Oh, spare me,” Satsuki shot back. “This is serious! A stunt like that would totally derail everything.” *Plus, I don’t know if I’d cry or drop dead or just freeze, but I think my capability to take something like that in stride is at an all time low. Even for Ryuko, I will not embarrass myself at one of the most important historical events I’ll take part in in my life!*

“Oh shit, I think I feel her coming. Coming in fast too, geez.”

And not a second later, as Satsuki and Nonon stepped out onto the patio Ryuko suddenly appeared as though from thin air. A blast of wind heralded her arrival, but not the jolt of shock through the patio stone Nonon expected.

“Ryuko!”

“Hey, Sats!” Ryuko called in an excited voice, her body silhouetted against the “kisaragi wings” that glowed and spun behind her shoulders. “Oh, hey, you’re here to,” She said to Nonon.

“This is my house, dickweed!” Nonon shouted, “Now what’s so goddamn important?” She asked the question, it so happened, almost a split second before she noticed.

Satsuki’s hand flew over her mouth to hide a disbelieving, wondering smile. “Oh, my.”

“Hol-y *shit* Ryuko!”

Her feet weren’t touching the ground. They hung suspended a few feet above the ground, a nimbus of light spinning up from her sneakers to her glowing hair.

She was flying.

“I know! I know! Isn’t it so – I mean, Wow!” Ryuko could barely contain herself, shaking her hands tremulously, overcome with euphoria. “I can fly! I can fly!”

“This is so amazing! Ryuko come here, let me see – whoa-hoa!” Satsuki grunted in an undignified manner as Ryuko scooped her up and zoomed up to hover well above Nonon’s head, carrying her bridal style gently but firmly. There was nothing more to say, they kissed for quite an extended time with that panoramic view of the cityscape all around them, and Nonon didn’t even feel inclined to complain. She too was caught in the excitement of it.

When Ryuko eventually set Satsuki down though there were obviously questions. “But how!” Nonon blurted just a moment before Satsuki could.

“Sorry, sorry! I just couldn’t resist. I was just sitting there waiting for you to call to get picked up and I thought I’d try it and when it worked I was gonna keep it as a surprise but I just couldn’t resist! I just had to feel the little threads through the air and kinda pull myself along them and it just worked I don’t know!” She babbled. She seemed to be able to drift quite calmly in the air, and Nonon knew that just as she had Ryuko had discovered that weightlessness felt so, so good.

“What does it feel like?” Satsuki asked breathlessly. “I want to hear all about it.”

“No seriously,” Nonon kept asking, “How did you start to learn it? It took Saiban months to figure it out!”

“Well, you remember how I said I was looking through Ragyo’s memories? She knew how to do, so now so do I. Something good finally came from her!” Ryuko laughed, turning a backflip like a dolphin just because she could.

[*Transform, quick!*] Saiban urged, and Nonon pulled her Sekki-Teko as fast as she could. When he was transformed and had assumed his Saiban Kyochuco form, they drifted up to her and Nonon held out her hand.

“Congratulations,” She said, and Ryuko took her hand and they embraced warmly.

“I didn’t expect that reaction,” Ryuko said.

“Hey, it’s *flight*. The best thing in the world. I only wish everyone could do it!” Then an idea seized Nonon, “Hey, speaking of, would you be comfortable if Satsuki stayed here for just a bit unattended? Nobody knows she’s here so how would an assassin?”

“I, um, if you’re thinking what I’m thinking, maybe. Sats, you cool with this?”

“Well it depends. Does your penthouse have a bolt-room?”

“Of course it does, who do you take me for? Behind the desk with the laptop on it in my bedroom, turn the wall lamp,” Nonon answered helpfully.

“Then in that case I shall remain there and amuse myself with work. I’d say take care, Ryuko, but... it doesn’t look like you need to.”

“Damn right! Just hold on Sats, when I come back I’ll tell you all about it but for now just... well I just *gotta* try this! Now come on!” She waved to Nonon and suddenly she was gone, screaming off into the sky. **“WHOOOO-HOOOO!”**

And without missing a beat Nonon tore after her into the atmosphere, a red and a gold trail of light and flames dipping and diving joyously through the clouds.

Satsuki watched them go, blinking back the happy tears beading in her eyes.



# Blumenkranz

## Chapter Summary

I think with chapters like this on I ought to remind everyone that this is a dystopian, fallen vision of our world. Posing the various other countries as oppressive and their rulers as tyrants isn't because I'm *\*that\** cynical about the real world. That's just how it is in 2067.

Also, Ryuko's entrance theme: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSr4Nv3kW6s>  
(there's a better quality version but it has a second part tacked on that's just a totally different song because the composer of Kill la Kill's a weirdo sometimes:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9S1HCMPuT\\_E&list=PL5PW5TdgaMAQ1fWyrLW5tBBRpIVLDZ3f5&index=13](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9S1HCMPuT_E&list=PL5PW5TdgaMAQ1fWyrLW5tBBRpIVLDZ3f5&index=13))

October 2067

~~~~~

Satsuki found Ryuko on the highest balcony of the Human Heritage Monument, the one that connected to the grand ballroom. She was watching as the thronging crowds trailed into the central pavilion, the limousines deposited dignitaries from every nation on the planet. The air crackled with a sense of exuberant anticipation; a grand triumph eagerly awaited.

"We're feeling nervous, I see," Satsuki surmised. She stood behind Ryuko, squeezing her arms tight around her waist.

"Thing is, can't say exactly why. Lookin' good, by the way," Ryuko toyed with the sleeve of Satsuki's dress: made of fine silk and cut like a traditional kimono with the flowing sleeves and the thick fabric belt around her belly, but with long, split skirts like a more typical dress. Simple and elegant, it had a floral pattern in red-orange that matched Ryuko's outfit, on a field of wavy blue patterns – blue-green and navy and sapphire – as though the petals were floating down a stream. The colors also matched to the swirls in the huge teardrop opal that rested comfortably on her chest. This wasn't a wear-for-one-party piece, Ryuko had made it for her, for *them*, and Satsuki felt at home wearing it.

"Thanks. So, talk to me, what're you thinking?"

"It's tricky. Like, I can make my entrance just fine, we practiced the timing. And I know I won't forget the speech."

"Mmm, that's one thing that I have observed about your memory. It takes forever for something to get in, but once it does you don't forget, ever. You know, there doesn't have to be any particular reason you feel ill at ease. This is a very remarkable situation," Satsuki said.

Ryuko sighed and said, "I can do it, I know. I know how to stand in front of a crowd, hold my head high, put a hat on, give a speech. Feel fine about it now. In the moment though, what if I

start feeling different?”

“Like an imposter? Like a normal girl again?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, I’m not gonna tell you it can’t happen. I can’t begin to count the amount of times I felt that same way.”

“Really? You?”

“Don’t look so surprised. I think the worst though had to be when you first arrived with Senketsu. Oh! That was awful. I felt about two inches tall.”

“No way!” Ryuko turned around, an incredulous smile on her face, “I was terrified of you, thought you were gonna kill me!”

“I had to be terrifying. Here, out of nowhere, comes this girl who’s already claimed a kamui, who’s stronger than me, scarier than me, and I didn’t consciously think it in the moment but a beautiful black haired woman like me. Basically my ready-made replacement. If I had done anything else, it all would have come crashing down right then and there. Don’t look so smug though, you were far from the most intimidating foe I was up against, I knew how to handle what scared me,” Satsuki ruffled Ryuko’s hair. Then she said, soft and insistent, “Do what makes you uncomfortable, what scares you. That’s the only path forward.”

Ryuko nodded, looking back out over the crowds, “It scares me too that one day this might feel normal to me. Because if it weren’t me being crowned, I’d be just as psyched as they all are. I mean this place is amazing! You said it only took three months to build?”

“That’s right,” Satsuki leaned on the wooden rail next to her. “I think it came together really well.”

“Thrown together so fast, it’s kinda like a good symbol for me right now, eh?”

“Now that isn’t fair,” Satsuki corrected her with a pointing finger and a slightly pedantic air, “Not to you, but to the architects. Even since we were born construction has advanced so much, there’s nothing at all shoddy here. Why you should know, remember how swiftly Honnouji was rebuilt after the berserk incident?”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I remember being kinda amazed how all the rubble was cleared out in like just a week, and the walls were back up too. I just figured the damage wasn’t as bad as I remembered.”

“If you can dream it, it can be built,” Satsuki said, which felt rather pointed to Ryuko. She had the power – mostly ceremonial, but still – to order things built on her own, and that was Satsuki’s permission, “*It’s alright, you’re allowed to reshape the world if you want*”. “Oh look! Here come the Americans.”

Satsuki pointed to a particularly large convoy of limousines working their way up a side road to the second story buildings with the huge balconies where the foreign dignitaries were being seated. A host of stiff white men in stiff white suits disgorged from them. Ryuko gave a distasteful sniff.

“And remind me, their emperor isn’t coming, right? Didn’t he try to kill Uzu when he visited for diplomacy way back when?”

“He most certainly is not, and yes Uzu did have to flee the country on a smuggling ship, but both sides have chosen to... overlook that ugly incident. In any case, even if he weren’t on his deathbed, he’s too paranoid to leave his palace. No, you just have to deal with his ministers, zealots and savages to a man. Oh how the mighty have fallen.”

“Such a shame,” Ryuko sighed, “I love their movies.”

“No, you love their *old* movies. And everyone does. I honestly wouldn’t recommend bringing it up when you meet them at the reception – well, no, if you want to make them uncomfortable feel free.”

“Oh, that sounds fun.”

Satsuki hum chuckled, “In that case, if the thought of the party later isn’t enough to get you through this day, just imagine how crazy it will drive those evangelical nuts when you stand up there – closest thing to a living prophet – and tell them that everything they believe in is wrong.”

~~~~~

“It has been forty years since the imperial family of our nation abdicated,” Satsuki bellowed over the crowds. In the distance, far beyond the gates of The Monument, there was the echo of her voice and the distant image of her standing on the dais surrounded by various government officials, all projected from huge screens across the city where even larger crowds had come from across the country to watch. “And turned us over to the hands of my mother, Ragyo, and her megacorp vassals. It has been an unmitigated disaster, even before Ragyo’s plans for humanity were revealed. It was little more than industrialized looting. I shudder to think how few people are left who can clearly remember the time when our nation was whole. We are a young people, but we have seen much hardship. That time is over. It is time to reclaim our traditions, recover Japan’s dignity and prosperity!”

There was a pause for applause before she went on, “But this time it will be different. Because our imperial heritage too is one of conquest and bloodshed. We now have a new leader for a new age. Ryuko Matoi, and her attendant Kamui, have no use for the petty conquests and vanities that have haunted insecure rulers across history. She is not the top of a pyramid up which all wealth flows for meaningless consumption, but a great canopy, under which humanity may thrive. That is the nature of her character – believe me, I know,” After another pause she went on, “I am so very happy to be welcoming in this new era with you, but I must admit that I do not feel worthy to be its herald. Though the world has seen fit to forgive me for being complicit in Ragyo’s reign of terror, my crimes will haunt me for the rest of my life. Far better that I pass this honor onto someone more deserving. Mako Mankanshoku! Please approach.”

The dais was in the center of a wide, shallow pond surrounded by gardens, with the waterfall dropping into mist and craggy rocks behind it. It connected to the rest of the pavilion by a flat bridge of stone. At the end of that bridge stretched a red carpet, an open lane down to the towering main gates, on either side of which were rows of huge red banners and columns that kept the thronging crowds separate. And where the bridge met the red carpet there were two sturdy viewing stands – one for the Kinagases and one for the Mankanshokus.

A cheer went up as Mako descended from her seat and crossed the bridge. Maybe not a heroic kamui-wearing warrior, but people knew who she was – maybe even more so considering she had a social media presence unlike the rest of them. She approached Satsuki with calm steps, but her mouth hung open and her eyes were wide with wonder as though she was dreaming.

“Uh, hiya Satsuki,” She said softly.

Satsuki mouthed, “You’re doing great.” And then she said loudly, “Mako Mankanshoku, we all owe you a great debt for your power to light Ryuko’s heart up. Without you there for her when things looked bleakest, we all might not be here. And now I know that you’ll be a light for our nation just the same way. I’m honored to be the first to call you Princess Mako,” Satsuki bowed and presented her with a circlet. With her heart in her throat, Mako barely noticed as she mechanically took the circlet – simple and sleek to match the classy but not at all ostentatious skirt-suit she’d asked Ryuko to make for this occasion. Only once it was on her head did she exhale and really let the size of the crowd sink in.

She’d expected it to feel scarier. But they were so far away it was like she was shouting from a balcony over a crowded city street, which she’d done plenty of times. Confidence restored she clicked on her mic and shouted, “Hi! I just wanna say – well, I just wanna say how crazy this is all is! When I was girl lots of people used to tell me I’d never amount to anything, I was a loser, that the only friends I’d ever have were the ones I made up. But they were kinda right about that one, is the funny thing. I picked Ryuko, I was the one who looked at her and decided ‘we’re going to be best friends’. I didn’t know what was gonna happen, I just thought she looked cool and since then I’ve almost died like *a lot* of times but it’s okay because it worked out in the end! And none of you know what’s gonna happen to you either, so get out there and live like you never know when something great’s gonna come along! You wanna live how Ryuko wants, well that’s how you do it! After all, the world almost blew up, what are you scared’s gonna happen now?”

Mako’s short speech ended and she turned back to Satsuki, who nodded and said (with her mic off), “That was quite good, Mako. It seems I was wrong about you needing a script after all.”

Mako giggled and shouted, “Okay Nonon! Take ‘er away!”

~~~~~

Almost the moment she said it a booming zoom and a deep, bassy thud announced Nonon’s arrival. As if from nowhere Nonon dropped right next to her – Saiban fully transformed into flight mode, glowing with golden flames that washed across the stone and made the audience gasp. And on cue the music started.

Booming drums at a heart-pounding volume from within the crowds as mechanical stages suddenly rose, revealing the full orchestra that had been hidden amongst them. Everyone but the foreign dignitaries (and after a moment, even some of them), began to clap along with the rhythm – they’d been coached that there would come a moment where this would be expected, and that they’d know it when they saw it.

With a look of pure excitement on her face Nonon signaled for the pageantry to continue by lifting Kiba high and pointing it along the red carpet to the open gates. The music swelled with a fast-flying strings section and a menacing, building electric guitar riff. Braziers suddenly lit with fire and spotlights glowed over the columns along the central avenue and suddenly, as if from nowhere, the kamui corps dropped down onto them. Tsumugu and Shiro dropped nearest the dais,

then Uzu and Houka, then Rei and Aikuro, and finally Ira at the end, and Nonon flitted over to join him before powering down.

Suddenly the spotlights shifted skyward. It was overcast just as Nonon had hoped it would be, so the lights shafted through the clouds. There was something flying up there, just a dot, but it trailed red flames. And it zoomed so fast the clouds parted behind it.

The music gathered in tension as that something – not that there was any real doubt what, or who, it was – dropped down into Osaka and abruptly angled out along mainstreet, roaring right toward's the momuments gate. The noise of the people outside was a like a wave growing closer and closer until a burning red-orange glow entirely obscured the gate.

And with a huge blast of music as the horns blared a triumphant anthem in Ryuko burst through the gate, flying with her diaphanous wings of life-fibers trailing behind her, wrapped in fire. With superhuman timing, each pair of kamui transformed, straining to make the process as long and explosive as possible. The crowds wept both from the brilliant light and the sheer excitement, the foreign dignitaries were struck with awe as eight huge apparitions, flaming shadows of vast, almost draconic creatures, leapt to life as Ryuko sped past. As they collapsed onto their humans and the light faded it was plain to see what the fire Ryuko had shrouded herself in had done – the red carpet and banners were burning, turning into beautiful, smokeless embers that drifted away. And underneath them, made of fireproof carbonfibers, new banners. Japan, Indonesia, the Reconquest flag, and a new one: Red scissorblades surrounded by a white sunburst on a black field. The carpet too had been replaced by a white one adorned with yet more scissor blades that shot out from the sides and angled down toward the dais.

It all happened in a single moment of pure fire and glory, and then Ryuko turned off and slowed considerably, the fires going out. She peeled low over the crowd, spiralling around in circles, and they held their hands up and she tried to brush or slap as many as possible. Finally, when that was done she arced over the pond and circled it too, speeding up as she climbed from water level until she was some five stories up right above the center of the dais where Mako and Satsuki waited for her. She spread her arms wide as she came to a stop, creating a cone of glittering water droplets that only magnified the warm, campfire-like glow that backlight her.

*Yeah, I could get used to this,* She finally admitted to herself. She didn't even bother trying to hide the big, stupid grin on her face.

~~~~~

### Cherry Blossoms.

That's what they'd settled on for her crown. Of course, before she could put it on there was the matter of actually being sworn into by the Prime Minister. A bit dull compared to everything that had just happened, but then again everyone, even Ryuko, needed little breather after that. The music didn't stop though to the orchestra's eternal credit, and a classy, majestic oboe solo played Ryuko through this slow moment.

But then things swiftly turned to a near-religious sounding chorus as Ryuko turned to address the crowd. She lifted off the ground slowly so everyone could see as she placed her hands to her temples and slowly worked them back along her head. Behind them, drawn from thin air, came a glowing wreath of delicate cherry blossoms that sketched themselves to life, golden but glinting with a bright pink metallic luster. Like her outfit, like the glowing wings behind her shoulders, it was carved from her very own life-fibers.

“This crown is not bestowed upon me,” She intoned the speech she and Satsuki had spent many late nights writing, scrapping, and rewriting as she placed it upon her head. “It is not handed down from a higher power. And though the people have permitted me to wear it, they have not given it to me either. It is part of me, a symbol of my resolve, my duty to forever protect the Earth from destruction. And it is just that, a symbol. That duty didn’t begin today, nor will it end if ever one day I set this crown aside. So long as humanity is locked in war with the life-fibers. I will be here, and I’ll be ready.”

She went on, “And that’s what this is, war. A fight for our survival! We all know by now that we aren’t alone in the universe, and that isn’t a good thing. But know this, the life-fibers aren’t just another species that happened to crash-land on Earth. They *created* us. If they hadn’t come to uplift us, we would all still be nothing more than any other animal. If there is a god that watches over Earth, then all it ever wanted for us was to remain on the savannahs, hunting with spears and scrounging in the dirt, and never looking to the stars and wondering if there was something more out there. But the life-fibers came from the stars and changed that fate. Without them, we wouldn’t know hate, or war, or suffering. Without them we wouldn’t know art, or joy, or love either. But all of that, everything that makes us *human*, just makes us a better source of fuel to them. It makes our souls particularly delectable.”

“Yes, that’s right. They would’ve taken not just our flesh but our minds too. And we aren’t the first, nor will we be the last. The reason why our first alien encounter was with them and not some other creature that might have liked us more is because they’re the only ones left. But after millions of years, for the first time maybe ever, the harvest has spoiled. And they’re scared. Maybe until Krakatoa you could have believed that REVOCS was just a regional terrorist issue, some desperate fanatics. No longer. Once again our enemies are trying to destroy us, trying to deny us the time to learn about them. And you know why? Because they know we can make kamui. Can make hybrids like me. And the thing about life-fibers,” She plucked one from her wing and let it drift in between her hands before retracting it back into herself, “Is that each on their own is just a piece of something greater. Like a cell that can think. But they don’t care if they’re part of the ancient intelligence that is trying to destroy humanitt, or part of me or my kamui – not human in form but human in mind and spirit. In fact, they seem to prefer being part of us, when we cut them off, they gravitate to us. And the intelligence that controls them knows this, it knows that if we keep on going like this, we can turn *all of it* into us. Into humanity. And that is my mission, that is my purpose! I will overthrow the life-fibers, no matter how long it takes!” Somehow, that sounded much more real than the idea that she was now a queen. Much easier to accept the weight of such a monumental task when she shed this constraining human form.

“But... I can’t do it alone. And I don’t just mean my kamui either. If I should be victorious, but humanity went extinct in the battle, then even if I saved other, alien worlds that would be a victory so hollow that I can’t accept it. I will live, if REVOCS succeeds, but for what? And we have many more threats that REVOCS facing us. You know what I mean: our planet is sick. The life-fibers are counting on it, they’re expecting that the volcanoes or the rising ocean or the food shortages or the fuel shortages or our own stupid wars will bring us down. They *engineered* us to be wasteful, too wasteful to last forever because they didn’t expect us to. Well, we already defied their ordained fate once, we can do it again, only this time it won’t just be a few hard days of touch-and-go fighting around Honnouji, this time it will take all of us, regardless of nation, beliefs, race, age, anything! This is humanity’s fight to survive in a universe that wants us gone!”

As she spoke Ryuko kept slowly rising, allowing more and more of her life-fibers to slip loose of her body and her wings kept expanding, layering, unfolding like a huge wheeling flower. The energy surged through, the rush of releasing herself, ceasing to hold back made her crave

pushing even further, but for now it was enough to shout, “Will you stand and fight? For the war has just begun, and there’s nowhere left to run! This is your time, your chance! Take it!”

With her superhuman eyes Ryuko could see every face in the crowds, belting out “MATOI! MATOI! MATOI!” at the top of their lungs. She could see they’d understood the implications – the kamui, and her, were human in all but form, in all the ways that mattered. Maybe they were even the next step in humanity’s evolution. And she had invited them to come forth and fight for that future with her.

And she could see that plenty of the foreign diplomats were shifting uncomfortably in their seats. Lots seemed in just as complete of rapture as the people below, but plenty weren’t too pleased by what they heard. They understood the implications too – saving humanity from the life-fibers and itself would take the whole world’s cooperation. Trouble was, with the kind of passions she aroused in the masses, cooperating with the new queen might easily become serving her.

~~~~~

“Your Majesty! It’s an honor to meetchu in person, real honor. Congratulations! Please, take ‘dese little gifts as sign a’ our support, and the respect of all a’ the Tristate Commonwealth,” The diplomat said in English, in what Ryuko was coming to recognize as a New York accent – a rough and unpleasant one to her ears. Only natural, the Tristate Commonwealth was one of the American secession states that had sprung up in the chaos of the 20s, rebellions against the central government, the wealthy, pretty much the entire system. Of course, most places they hadn’t made it when the central government sent in the military to clean up – transforming themselves from republic to empire in the process - but in the area around New York they had the numbers and more importantly the money to dig in and hold the east coast’s biggest ports hostage and so here were these glorified mobsters today representing the Tristate Commonwealth. Ryuko remembered what Satsuki had said, that unlike the American Empire the Commonwealth had never sent any secret funds to REVOCS, in the hopes that they’d destabilized the new regime – her regime. Rough customers though they looked in their pinstripe suits and with their gold chains, they were at least something like neutral.

So she clapped the diplomat on his meaty shoulder and straightened him up from his bow, and the rest of his entourage did likewise. She said in English, “We’re happy to have you. Please, enjoy the festivities. Only, I think you’ve made a mistake, that doesn’t look like a little gift.” She approached a huge object that could only be described as a cart the size of a small truck, with something large and lumpy under the huge sheet thrown over it.

“Ah,” The lead commonwealth diplomat said, and with a snap of his fingers his entourage snapped into action and the sheet was flung out across the crowded ballroom.

“Oh my *god!*” Ryuko clapped her hands together in shock as a fully mounted and articulated dinosaur skeleton, nearly forty feet long and bearing hulking, dagger shaped teeth, was revealed. It stood among a growing pile of antique cars and barrels of vintage wine and sculptures and paintings and a million other things that various nations had given as gifts.

“It’s the most complete T-rex skeleton eva’ found!” The diplomat declared proudly, “We, er, rescued it from the looting of Chicago way back when, but The City’s museum’s already got a T-rex and we figured it wouldn’t be right to just replace ‘er. And then hey, we heard you might like ‘er!”

Ryuko beamed at Satsuki, who softly said, “I couldn’t resist.”

“Well – I mean this is just – Wow! But where the hell can I put this thing?”

“We have a lot of empty space right here in this building you know,” Satsuki suggested.

“Hell yeah, we’ll make a whole museum! With this and all the crazy art and stuff I’ve gotten today! Thanks guys, this is really killer! Now c’mon, you guys had anything to eat? Gotta get some in before some other diplomat ambushes me!”

While she was perusing the hors d'oeuvres, swimming in the fun of being a classy hostess with Satsuki, Ryuko spotted a friendly face. “Yo, is that who I think it is? Liza! I was hoping you’d come!”

The Australian heiress was in much better condition than last time Ryuko had seen her. Liza Stanhardt bobbed up, golden locks shining and dress sparkling with little pearls. Her expression was probably about the same as Ryuko had on her face too, gazing around at all the luxurious décor and bright and important faces and the heaping mounds of food, almost unwilling to believe it was all real. “Your Majesty Queen Matoi!” She gasped in Japanese, totally unprepared and stammering, “Congratulations!”

“Oh, please, please. I’ve practiced my English,” Ryuko lied, “Speak how you’re comfortable. Now, it’s so good to see you.”

If Ryuko was worried that Liza harbored any ill will, or that her father the Executive Minister was going to show any, she needn’t worry. “Thank you. Your speech today, that was amazing! I was shaking, really! And Lady Satsuki, yours too! And don’t worry, we’re having so much fun aren’t we Dad? Mom?”

Liza’s parents gave their very cordial greetings – they weren’t exactly about to give any gifts considering that half their country was on fire and the other was being put out by Reconquest soldiers at that moment.

“Have you met everyone yet? You’ve gotta meet Mako and Ira!” Ryuko said excitedly.

“Oh, they’re so great! And Rei too, she was telling me about – Oh shit, but I didn’t mean - look, if I knew about you two, I’d never have agreed to the whole engagement thing.”

“Liza,” Satsuki said, trying to interrupt her babbling.

“And I just want to say that I think it’s unbelievable what you two were willing to do just to help my people, don’t feel bad about that or-,”

“Hey, it’s fine!” Ryuko loudly said.”

“Oh.”

They sat for a while and talked with Liza before the main course came out. And as it did and everyone took their seats to tuck in the band began to assemble, beginning with some classy ballads and then when everyone got done some of Nonon’s favorite pop-dance compositions, head banging beats with an interesting, jazzy twist that prodded just about everyone under forty to dance, and before long there was a run on the bar as it became known a second shipment of booze would have to be dropped in.



Ryuko felt like she was dreaming. This was some sort of glitzy, bacchanalian vision of heaven on Earth, the hugest party she'd ever thrown and that was saying a lot. And Satsuki, god *Satsuki*, she was so glorious. Ryuko thought she'd seen her in her element at council meetings, but that was nothing compared to this. She was drunk enough that she didn't really even appreciate everything Satsuki was doing for her, didn't really see how many hangers on seeking favors she waved off. Wait until tomorrow, give her one night without having to understand the realities of power.

She was watching Nonon and Uzu leading the couple's dances, admiring an antique Harley someone had given her, when suddenly.

The music stopped with a scratch. Everyone went suddenly still and silent. And then Houka was on the stage saying "Ladies and Gentlemen, there has been an attack. The capital of Australia, Canberra and all other major coastal cities have fallen."

Immediate uproar. Ryuko sobered herself up immediately as the room exploded in panic. Everyone shouting in outraged tones, all the Australian guests trying to call their families. She could immediately pick out all the important voices.

"Agh! I *knew* it was a mistake bringing everyone home!" Nonon screeched.

"Well don't look at me!" Uzu shot back, "We all agreed it was fine!"

Liza, on the verge of tears, "Oh my god, Auntie Marie and the kids! Papa, papa tell me they're alright!"

The executive minister using his faded strength to push his way up to Houka, "What're you saying! What's happened! Is it REVOCS? A coup!"

**"SILENCE!"** Ryuko roared, drowning everyone out.

When the pandemonium died down, she waved for Houka to continue. The screen behind the stage, which had previously displayed images of the larger parties going on in the streets below, now changed to a city skyline on fire, mobs washing through the streets. Houka said, "I'm afraid it's neither, sir. It's a revolution."

More gasps, more shouting. Ryuko could practically smell the fear. Revolution, the one word all these scions of the privileged classes feared. Houka continued reporting in an utterly unphased tone, "The citizens of Australia have taken the opportunity to seize control of all major arteries in and out of the cities and all major government offices. With the cooperation of Reconquest soldiers from Japan and Indonesia."

Ryuko looked on with a mixture of dismay and something else, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Her party was evaporating, but something new was beginning and she knew what she needed to do. "I guess I start my new job now."

Ignoring the chaos around her, Ryuko breezed calmly to the balcony. Satsuki was right next to her, calm too but also intense in those subtle ways most people couldn't detect. "What are you planning?"

"You remember that time I went on TV to try and stop those crazies over in Europe, and it wasn't enough? Well this time I'm not gonna waste time with that. I'll fly down there, feel out the

situation, and do whatever I think's appropriate."

Satsuki understood and nodded, "Good luck."

But then Nonon came screeching up, "Where do you think you're going? Take control of the situation!"

"I am. I'm going to make them stop before the killing gets any worse."

"What? Ryuko you can't! Stop! Rrrr – Look at me asshole!" She seized Ryuko by the arm and forced her to wheel around. "You can't just *fly* to Australia and take control of the situation! Even if you're queen, you don't have the authority!"

"Actually, I do. The queen has absolute authority over the military in times of emergency, which last I checked we're in one permanent 'til REVOCS is dealt with. And that's our military killing people down there so yeah I think I have the authority."

Nonon could only sputter.

"Yeah, that's right, I read that whole thing. You really thought I wouldn't?"

"Then you *know* that's only the *Office* of the Queen that has that authority!"

"Oh yeah, meaning what, *you*?" Ryuko responded sarcastically. By now a small crowd had gathered to watch them. "Look, yeah, fine you get to represent the Office of the Queen, that works for me, but act like you call the shots one more time and I'll revoke that so fast your head'll fucking spin!"

Nonon didn't really have a response to that, so she said, "Okay, fine, I'm sorry! But can't you just take a moment to think about what you're doing?"

Ryuko was turning to go and looked at her over her shoulder. "I did. Nonon, you're the one who put me in this position, so you can either trust in me," She sprung into the air and hovered for a split second as she said, "Or keep up."

And then she soared into the evening sky, tearing the sound barrier to ribbons on the way.

~~~~~

Ryuko climbed high, high above the clouds, where even planes rarely bothered travelling. Oriented by the position of the sun, she zoomed south, insensate to how fast she was going. She'd hoped to have more practice travelling at mach speeds before she really needed it, but it came naturally enough. In a shockingly short amount of time she came upon the ash clouds from Krakatoa and skirted along them until the landforms beneath her began to look recognizable.

Alone in the endless expanse of the sky, Ryuko didn't take much time to trouble herself with what she was going to do. Everything vanished into just the horizon, the smooth, inky evening ocean, and her. For just a little while Ryuko felt totally empty of anxiety or anger. Just peace and focus.

By plane, the transit from Japan to Australia takes roughly nine hours. Ryuko did it in two.

~~~~~

Canberra was built with the parliament building at its center, and though it had been renovated into a much larger, more palatial complex it remained the natural place in the city where a large crowd would gather, where a motley crew of revolutionary leaders would plot their next move.

They certainly weren't expecting Ryuko to collapse upon them like a meteor, suddenly standing wreathed in her own blazing light amongst them. But that's exactly what happened and – with a fervor that confirmed to her that this was the answer to their wildest dreams, they all fell to their knees around her.

“I need a drink. Scotch, neat.”

As they hurried to procure this meager hospitality Ryuko surveyed the scene. It was a mess alright. First, the city had been captured by REVOCS, then anyone who hadn't been captured or driven off had fought a guerilla war over the rubble with them, setting traps and hiding in basements, then the Reconquest had swept through. And finally, this. Someone held the glass up for her and she gratefully sipped from it.

“Alright, talk to me. What's been going on here.”

One man, their appointed leader said, “Your Majesty, it is an honor beyond honors to witness you in person. We have subjugated all but a last couple holdouts, Your Majesty, I hope that is satisfactory.”

*Satisfactory*, “You did this for me, did you?”

“Well... yes.”

“Stop trying to kill the holdouts, offer them terms to surrender, immediately,” She declared. *Oh, I may have made some huge mistakes.*

“Please, Your Majesty, we haven't displeased you... have we?” He seemed desperate.

“Displeased? Well, maybe no. Can you tell me what exactly it is that gave you the indication I wanted this?”

“Y-you said that all humanity needed to work together to defeat the life-fibers?”

“Sure, but do they,” She pointed to the bodies that lay on the parliament steps, “Look much like life-fibers to you?”

“Well, no...”

“Your Majesty, if I may,” Another voice, a young woman with a missing eye, “The people we removed from power today were not committed to the war. They waited and delayed for months before they let kamui into the country, and they fled to their country mansions and their island compounds to wait it out and *left* the rest of us-”

Ryuko made a show of whirling around on the woman who spoke out of turn, but then cracked a smile. “Good answer. You see? This isn't about me. This revolt has been a long time

coming, I just gave you the timing and the rallying cry. Question is, where do we go from here?" She finished her drink as she gave them the chance to process that.

Finally, the young woman said, "We want you as our Queen."

So that was it. Ryuko supposed she could stop the bloodshed for a day just by ordering it, but then it would be just like in Indonesia. A firm hand at the top was needed to make sure this whole transition didn't turn into years of bloody infighting; she saw exactly what Nonon had meant. The crowds below them flooded the circular road around the parliament building and were still growing. The glow she cast was visible for miles around.

She raised an eyebrow and said, "Do you now? And can you speak for the rest of your countrymen?"

"I can."

"I'd prefer to find out myself," Ryuko said, and she lifted off and zoomed to a stop high above, allowing even more of her power to escape than she had before at the coronation. Against the smoke and the night sky her huge wings were like something from a dream, stretching almost a hundred feet end to end, traced through with every minute detail. It sure got everyone's attention.

**"People of Canberra!"** She shouted, not even thinking about how she threw her voice louder than it could ever naturally go. **"I am Ryuko Matoi! I have come to put an end to this senseless killing! We are all human, and today you have triumphed! Do not avenge past injustices upon these poor people!"** Those were the words she had planned, and now she jumped into what she judged the situation to call for **"I have spoken with your leaders, and they've said they want me to step in as Queen of your nation! Do they speak for you?"**

The crowd roared back, a noise that could only be taken as jubilant approval. **"Do you, people of Australia, wish me to be your Queen and protector?"** Once again, their assent was resounding.

What was she supposed to do?

**"Very well, that's how it'll be! We will rebuild your cities and your society together now!"**

Ryuko kept hanging there in the sky until it seemed the crowd had just about wrung itself out. When she dropped to the ground a surreal feeling passed over her. She couldn't believe those words had just come out of her mouth! Regularly, Ryuko might've frozen in front of such a large crowd, could never have taken such a great decision into her hands. But she'd done it and it felt *good*, felt like the way she'd been at Honnouji, like a forgotten courage had resurfaced, only now refined. She'd taken lessons from the master, after all, and she knew exactly how to be everything Rago wasn't. *But I guess I see now there is one way she was right. If you're going to try and rule, it helps if you shine like the sun.*

Fortunately, Ryuko's new royal vestments were tough enough to withstand mach speed flight no problem, and he phone emerged from her pocket still intact. It was a relief to hear Satsuki say, ~ "Hello dear?" ~

"Well, it looks like the Stanhardts did wind up giving me a gift after all Sats."

In the coming weeks, similar rebellions would sweep mainland Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and New Zealand. There was simply no denying what was occurring, and after the first time neither Ryuko nor Nonon nor anyone else bothered trying to stop it. And so it was that practically overnight a new world superpower was born, the League of the Pacific. On its flag the scissor blades that cut the threads of fate, on its leader's head the cherry blossom crown that stood for everything that was worth fighting for about life on Earth.

And the petty tyrants who ruled the rest were right to be afraid.

~~~~~

Here's some more stunning fanart by FishTheTaco2! This time it's Nonon and Saiban in both base form and powered-down/civilian form! Exactly how it looked in my head, I'm so amazed I keep going back to look at it.



I set up a spare discord account so FishTheTaco2 could coordinate with me on this, and I think I might as well drop it here just in case anyone wants to chat about this fic or maybe even make other fics or art inspired by my work: EnhLut\_spare#5463. Just add me and dm me if you want to use it, but don't feel obligated I'm not fishing for more people.

# Marry me, you jerk

## Chapter Summary

Bit of a spoiler in the title but whoa man.

Been a bit of a beast to write, mostly because of real life business but also just because. It's an important chapter I really didn't want to bungle it.

I may not have a chapter up next week. It's crunch time on a project. After that I should be freer for a bit.

Discord: EnhLut\_spare#5463

## Chapter Notes

After receiving a critique I decided that the one point I really agreed on was that I ought to add in Satsuki's side of the proposal to this chapter. Considering it was supposed to have happened directly after what I wrote I don't consider this to be changing the "canon" at all, I just didn't know exactly what this would look like when I was first writing this chapter. Next chapter up in the next few days.

October 2067

~~~~~

The lake mansion was bustling with activity when Nonon arrived, cars and movers parked in the front loop and more vans around the side. One of the wings was under construction, adding a new floor, but compared to the scale of the place the ugly sight of the crane and the fresh unpainted walls was small. On the descent, she spotted a lot of people milling around in the courtyards and Saiban felt as many huge auras as he expected. She blasted down to the huge front yard, blowing a misting spray out of the fountain behind her.

In the grand foyer, there were movers and household staff bustling all over, transferring practically everything the Kinagases and the Mankanshokus owned into the once vacant rooms. A bunch of kids who must have been Mataro and Mako's cousins (same big amber eyes and chestnut hair) were running up and down the spiral stairs, playing a game where they pretended they had kamui and swatting at each other with foam swords. Despite all of that, the punctilious young man Ryuko had picked as the mansion's butler was still there waiting. The burst of energy as Nonon powered down blew his hair up and flung his tie over his shoulder.

"Lady Nonon, welcome! I've informed the lady of the house of your arrival, please do not hesitate to inform me of anything we could do to improve your stay! I hope your travels have

been-,”

He was cut off quite abruptly as Nonon growled, “Ugh, don’t even mention it! We’ve flown halfway to Beijing and back this morning and I’m fuckin’ starving! Gimme a double shot espresso, a corned beef and pastrami on rye – with cheese and all the rest, and a bracer spool of life-fibers - I *know* Ryuko’s got a couple in the basement. Well? Move it!”

“Oy! The hell are you doing, yelling like that! I know you think they’re just ‘*the help*’, but they work for me and I don’t even talk to them like that! Now calm down!” Suddenly Ryuko was there, breezing through the doors from a side hallway with a stormy, preoccupied look on her face. Still, she clapped Nonon on the shoulder and said, “So, how’dya like the place?”

“It’s a dump! All these Mankanshoku twerps running everywhere, furniture and boxes all over. Otherwise, the new fountain looks alright,” Nonon joked cordially.

Ryuko nodded, “Sats’s in my grandparents’ room. Go on, have some fun interior decorating. Houka and Tsumugu’re here, rest’ve the boys’ll be here before dinner I don’t doubt it.” She turned to the butler and said, “Oh, but please do send word to the kitchen, have them send up some food for her. Sorry about her, she’s always in a rush.”

She went with Nonon down the side hall, lined on one side with majestic windows and the other with the doors to family suites and lounges. “Jokes aside, this is probably the best of the old Kiryuin estates. Satsuki was smart to hang onto it, that big patio, that’ll be a beauty when it comes to entertaining guests.”

“Hey, whoa,” Ryuko turned around on her, stopping her, “This isn’t a place for foreign dignitaries. It’s for friends and family. So, when you talk to local powerbrokers in the former states of Laos and New Zealand and Korea and wherever you tell them the place to go for important business is Tokyo, not my house. Right?”

“Right,” Nonon affirmed. Ryuko’s mood had been a bit of a mixed bag since the coronation, with things being as busy as they had. Nonon had to field more than a couple of late night rants about god-knows-what group of random radicals making this or that demand before they’d give up their remote mountain stronghold, about some speech where maybe the crowd hadn’t been as receptive as they should’ve been, about some governor coming to her asking favors that *sounded* reasonable but she just wasn’t sure. This was all to spare Satsuki a headache, nobody needed to tell Nonon that.

But besides that, and the occasional bouts of frustration, Ryuko had been strong lately. The way Satsuki had been in the bad old days – she said she’d do something, and then she did it. Only Ryuko didn’t act all high and mighty about it, no morals wrapped in it, no megalomaniacal speeches delivered from high towers. People just brought her problems and she stepped up and told them it was her way, no other option. Even when she didn’t know if her way was exactly right.

Nonon had to respect it.

“Don’t look so fuckin’ glum girl, this is home for the family too. You know what I mean?” Ryuko asked, and Nonon shrugged, “Oh hey, feel that? Uzu’s coming in.”

*[We’ve been sensing him for twenty miles, of course we know. On time for once, naturally Seijitsu gets the credit]* Saiban said.



“Oh, no doubt,” Nonon said as they turned around back into the grand foyer just as a whooshing noise signalled Uzu’s landing outside.

“The Queen of the East!” Uzu shouted as soon as he’d powered down. He gave Ryuko a wrist-handshake and then put an arm around Nonon, “This makes your penthouse look like a bouncy castle I gotta say. So, when’s dinner?”

“Geez, you guys spend all day in the upper atmosphere and then act surprised when you come back to Earth hungry. Dinner’s at dinnertime, but the kitchen’s already making Nonon something for lunch, I’ll send word have them make you some. Sandwiches?”

“Yeah, sure. So, I hear Houka’s already here?”

“Yeah, out in the garden if you can believe that. Apparently, we have an endangered hydrangea or something and he’s taking a DNA sample, how about that?” At this point Satsuki emerged from a side hallway, a preoccupied look on her face not at all unlike Ryuko’s. But both of them looked up warmly at each other, as though they hadn’t spent all morning and now half the afternoon arranging their new home together. “Heyyyy!”

Satsuki smiled, “Hey you. And I’m glad to see you both, Nonon, Uzu. Make yourselves at home. Oh, and there was a call, Ryuko, from the Commerce Minister. They’ve got some kind of issue with the disaster relief fleet docked on the mainland, something about a mob of refugees trying to take the supplies. Since technically they’re your ships he wanted your input.”

“Seriously? I mean what am I gonna do? What do I know about it? They can figure that out themselves. But refugees, that’s who they’re trying to help anyway, no?” Ryuko turned to Nonon and Uzu with a shrug, “What can I say, it’s kinda neat how my new job doesn’t really have any rules, but the hours *suck*. I thought you said I’d be ‘mostly ceremonial’, eh?”

“You want to see how much work ‘not ceremonial’ is?” Nonon shrugged back.

“Well whatever, I will say hours may be rough, but I am *not* complaining about the benefits. C’mon, let’s do a little tour.”

~~~~~

The tour passed by uneventfully enough. Ryuko took them through all the rooms set up for the Kinagase extended family, then all those for the Mankanshokus, linking up with Tsumugu and Aoi on the way. They were keeping their house near Tokyo, but were helping Tsumugu’s parents move in. It would’ve been unthinkable of Ryuko not to offer her recently-reunited grandparents a place, and equally unthinkable for them to refuse - and not just for politeness’s sake, who wouldn’t want to live in a place like this? Solidly built, solid people like Tsumugu, they introduced themselves to the celebrity Kamui corpsmen like pros, but they still kept an awed distance from their “granddaughter”. It didn’t seem like they had any real idea how to approach her.

“At this point, I feel like I got nothin’ in common with them ‘sides saying ‘wow look how great this house is huh?’,” Ryuko said as they were leaving the Kinagase wing. “I mean, can’t figure out how I can talk about, well, my mom to them without things getting all awkward and stuff.” She looked over at Tsumugu and said confidently, “But I’ll figure it out, don’t worry.”

“They seem to really like you,” Aoi said, and when Ryuko’s look turned skeptical she said, “It’s true. You should’ve seen them when they first met me.”

“Man, so many books,” Uzu commented wonderingly, “No way they actually read them all. What, don’t look at me like that Satsuki, you know exactly what my GPA was. C’mom, no reading gang, back me up here.”

“Hell yeah, never learn!” Ryuko chuckled and bumped fists with him.

“Ah, guess I’m in too,” Nonon agreed.

“Too bad Aikuro’s off a thousand miles away today – if he could only see what’s become of his star students,” Tsumugu chuckled.

They regrouped with Houka too, on his way to stow his DNA samples somewhere. When they asked what he was gonna do with them his answer was simple, “Cloning.”

Not long after they came upon Mataro too – he was examining what the sports complex had on offer. He scrambled up the fence around the basketball court, thrilled to add his own comments and asides to the walking tour.

By the time they had wrapped back around to the front porch, the kitchens had completed their lunch and laid out a generous spread on a large table. Ryuko and Satsuki had more things to attend to, so they left them sitting there, overlooking the wide, pristine smooth lawn, the new fountain, and the never-ending stream of movers and renovators pouring into and out of the house.

Nonon and Uzu both dug in greedily – Huge sandwiches heaping with meat, sauce, cheese, it was shocking that even Uzu could finish his. Mataro observed this with an expression approaching disgust and said, “Y’know, I’m kinda sorry I let you make fun of how Mako eats now.”

“Oh, screw you, you know we need it.”

“One thing I’ve never gotten though, what’s with the love of foreign food? You could’ve asked for anything and you pick pastrami and corned beef on rye bread?” Houka asked, “And don’t deny it I’ve been to enough brunches with you, you always pick the hardest to pronounce thing on the menu.”

“Excuse me, but I have a cosmopolitan palate!” Nonon said proudly as she washed down the last bite of bread crust with a big swig of iced tea, “This coming from the guy who ate chicken nugget last night because Shiro’s not home to cook him dinner.”

“You weren’t supposed to tell anyone about that,” Houka frowned.

“Whatever, I’m sorry. But changing the subject, something’s up today, you guys noticed? With our hostesses, I mean. Ryuko’s been too friendly, even to me. And Satsuki’s been, well, old Satsuki.”

“She’s got a stick up her ass, you mean,” Uzu said, “I just sparred with her this morning and she said more than three sentences to me then. Something *is* up.”

Nonon motioned to the others, “Well, you all got here earlier than us, what do you think.”

“I think they’re just nervous. Not just because of this whole moving houses thing, but because this is the first time it’s just us and them, together. No crowds and no foreign diplomats, and they have to just see if we can get comfortable with this,” Tsumugu said, and Aoi nodded.

“Well, they shouldn’t have to worry about that at this point, right? I mean, I think I’ve on my own have given them both enough shit that we should be past that stage. Mataro, what do you think? Noticed anything today?”

“I mean not really; all I’ve done is move Mom and Dad’s shit all day and then messed around at the sports complex ‘til you guy showed up.”

“Houka?”

Houka shrugged noncommittally, but he said, “Have you noticed though? This is the anniversary of the first time they came up here together. I mean, not exactly, but it’s the last weekend of October, as close as you can get.”

Nonon was shocked, “How do you know tha-,”

“Oh shit you think one of ‘em’s gonna propose!” Uzu suddenly exclaimed, “Man, do you really think?”

“What did you think we were talking about? ... I really wonder what goes on in your head sometimes,” Houka chuckled, shaking his head in exasperation.

“Just fighting, that’s it, don’t bother asking,” Nonon said snidely, and they all had a good laugh at that. Then Nonon said, “But really, it could happen.”

“And what are you saying we do with that knowledge, try and stop them?” Uzu asked.

“No! Are you kidding? If it is happening, it needs to go off without a hitch. Just keep your eyes open, right?” Nonon whispered conspiratorially. Uzu was still struggling to come to terms with Nonon’s abrupt turn on Ryuko and Satsuki’s relationship, but the others all nodded seriously, thinking they understood. They thought she simply saw the political necessity of it, that they couldn’t get torn up by personal drama. Not like any of them were ready to accept yet that when she said they were right for each other, needed each other, that was what she really believed.

“So then,” Houka said, “Who do we think’s the one to pop the question?”

As much as they all would’ve claimed to be disinterested in gossip, the topic proved fruitful for a lengthy debate.

It was maybe an hour later when the answer to that question rolled up on them. Not that they’d know it though, it just looked like Ira and Mako and their two hulking German shepherds unloading from their car. Mako practically let the dogs drag her up the steps where they leapt all over Mataro, only to be swiftly rerouted as Ryuko and Satsuki came out the from within the house. They seemed almost torn between who was most deserving of being slobbered and shed all over.

“Oh! Look who’s here!” Ryuko called, and Mako bounded over almost as eagerly as her dogs. She had decided not to let herself change much with the whole princess thing, wearing a sky-blue turtleneck and a matching skirt – one of her favorite outfits.

“Ryuuukooo!” She flung herself at Ryuko, who caught her in a hug without much trouble. “Wow, everyone’s here!”

“I see, looks like everyone’s already had their tour and now we’re having a late lunch, huh?” Ira observed, “Ironically, lunch is what held us up, that and the appetizers we brought for tonight was still in the oven.”

“Mom’s croquettes! Best on the microwave, as you all know!” Mako announced, scurrying back to the car to produce a tray wrapped in tinfoil. Everyone was too busy cheering about that to notice as Ira carefully slipped something to Satsuki and they shared a subtle, knowing nod.

“C’mon, you missed the main tour but I’ll show you around,” Ryuko said to Mako, linking an arm with her and guiding her inside. If you were close enough, and listening very closely, you might have heard her whisper “Do you have it?”

~~~~~

“Alright, here’s your guest room! I moved your stuff in but, ah, you can move it around and all that,” Mataro said as he flung open the door. Mako’s eyes goggled at the sheer opulence of the place, the paintings, the mahogany panels, the chandelier. And of course, two huge dogs jumping right up on the fine silky sheets and making a mess of them.

“Huh, ante-room, lounge, master bedroom, walk-in closet, third floor balcony. You sure you didn’t lead us to Ryuko’s room by mistake?” Ira asked, pretending like he was serious.

Mataro chuckled, “Alright, well I’ll see you guys at dinner. Or find me and Tsumugu at the batting cages before then.”

The moment he shut the door Ira and Mako looked at each other, an expression between panic stricken and on the verge of laughter.

“Ohhh man this is bad!” Mako exclaimed.

“I know. What are we gonna do?”

“I *don’t* know! We’ve been talking about this for *days*, we just gave them the rings, and now they’re gonna – wait, what time did Satsuki say-”

“After dinner, when everyone clears off the patio-” Ira answered.

“-When everyone clears off the patio, yeah... Oh man oh man...”

Ira shrugged, pawing through the stuff in the walk-in closet. What was even the point of all that space if his side didn’t have any clothes in it?

*[Well, let’s be reasonable here. They’re both on the same page, so what’s really the problem? It’ll be one of those little mixups we’ll all laugh about later, right?]* Tekketsu asked. Ira rolled his eyes and she said, *[You’re right, what was I thinking?]*

“Perhaps, but it doesn’t solve the current problem,” Ira said.

“Huh?”

“Tekketsu just said that we’ll look back on this one day and laugh.”

“Hmm. That’s maybe true, but Ryuko’s gonna be so sad if she can’t do her speech. She said she wanted to do something really, actually romantic for once. We shouldn’t be getting worked up about this, but I just wanna see it go right so bad!”

“You think you’re the only one? Satsuki’s practically jumping out of her skin today.”

“Yeah...” Mako said thoughtfully. She’d gone out onto the balcony and was looking out over the pristine surface of the lake.

Ira came up behind her and said, “It’s all becoming real to you now, isn’t it?”

“Yup. Though I feel like that’s just every day nowadays. Never felt that way back at Honnouji, you know. When everything was exploding and it was just nonstop fighting you could roll with finding out Ryuko wasn’t human, going up and saving the world with her, and it was just sort of fine, right?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“But now that it just happens so easy and quiet, I’m caught off guard. We’re gonna go down there, have a cookout, and then by the time dessert is served Ryuko and Satsuki are gonna be engaged. How does that – I mean it just - *Ryuko...*”

“Hey now,” Ira brought a beefy finger to Mako’s cheek. She was doing her best to blink back happy tears, but it wasn’t working that well. “Stow that. You’ll need it later.”

She wrapped herself around his arm and said, “Can’t help it. I just feel every time I think about it, like ever since Mataro first dragged her home half dead and shaking pale, like I was looking out for her. Making sure she was eating, making sure she did her homework, making sure she wasn’t too beat up about all the crazy stuff always happening to her. Even though really it was her protecting me. And even though I was the last person in the world to trust with that. But I feel like now, this is the universe saying ‘look, everything turned out alright for her after all’. I feel like my job is done.”

*[Oh sweet, naïve Mako. She’s a queen now, soon to be married, maybe even eventually a mother. Let’s not tell her now, but I get this feeling Ryuko’s gonna need her more than ever.]*

~~~~~

It was a blustery, breezy kind of day, and that only increased as the afternoon treaded on and the shadows began to lengthen. The lakeside patio had gardens and trees surrounding it to eat up the majority of the wind, but the same couldn’t be said for the lawns past those which bordered the lake and rippled just like the water with every gust.

It was good weather for this. Ryuko looked so casually, naturally lovely with her hair blowing carefree on the wind. And the contrast between her warmth and the cool of the air made leaning close to her all the better. Not that Satsuki needed an excuse.

She didn’t say anything though. Not because she didn’t want to. It was just this little lump in her throat she barely noticed, gently prodding her that now wasn’t the time, not yet. They were well past the patch of grass where Mataro was playing soccer with some of his younger

cousins now, the spot was ideal. But it wasn't getting any less ideal ten, twenty, thirty yards on. And besides, Ryuko wasn't going anywhere.

Ryuko was quiet too but for her, well, she was doing a worse job keeping calm about it all. She kept going over the words again and again with the dreadful certainty that she was going to trip over them in the moment rising. Something was going to go wrong; she was sure of it. Satsuki must be expecting this. She had to know. Hell, everyone had to know, she'd been off her game all day. But if Satsuki was expecting it then the surprise was ruined. But if Ryuko didn't live up to that expectation then she'd be disappointed. So what the hell was she supposed to do?

Eventually though Ryuko did manage to work up the courage to talk, figuring she'd be able to talk her way into the right moment. "I wish it was always like this." God, she hoped Satsuki couldn't feel her racing heartbeat through their linked fingers. She hoped her palm wasn't as sweaty as it felt.

"Hmm?" Satsuki hummed distractedly, "Oh, yes. Today has been nice, hasn't it? Surprisingly trouble free, and the families got along quite well."

"Well, that's no big surprise. It's only been like, what, five or so months since I first met any of the Kinagase extended family, right? They're walking on eggshells. Well, most of them."

"Oh, yes, most of them. Hmmhmm," Satsuki hum-chuckled. "What is that boy, Mako and Mataro's... third cousin on Sukoyo's side? I'll have her talk to the mother about some more discipline, having them under the same roof won't work if he keeps bullying the Kinagase children."

"Or, better yet, I'll just get Mataro on him."

"And that will work?"

"Course! All the youngsters idolize him. Um, but speaking of the Kinagases, you're definitely okay with this, right?" Ryuko asked

"It was a stroke of genius on Tsumugu's part. And they are good people," Satsuki answered.

"No, that's not what I meant. You're okay with them all living here, right? I mean, it's like sixty people so far, and this was supposed to be your retirement home! I mean, I came up with the idea and then it just kept growing from there, never really got the chance to ask."

"Ryuko," Satsuki explained as though it was the simplest thing in the world, "If it can fit sixty people and still be more than half empty, what was I going to do with it on my own? In fact, I think I may come to enjoy how full of life it is now. And when it comes to privacy... you know we still have the entire top floor to ourselves, right? I think we'll find it sufficient."

Ryuko smiled devilishly at that suggestion, but she said, "Yeah, I think I like having them here too. It's gonna be almost like how it was when I first lived with the Mankanshokus. Especially if Mako comes around often, and if she brings those dogs because. Wow. I love them."

Satsuki hummed and said, "We have enough room for pets now too, you know that."

“Yeah, but who’s got the time?” Ryuko said. Their strolling slowed to a stop now, and they stood side by side facing out over the lake.

“Everyone else who lives and works here? Okay, maybe we couldn’t have our own pet, but we could acquire animals that just kind of live in the house. I think that could be good.”

“Gotta get a cat then. Definitely at least one.”

“Definitely.” Satsuki sighed, “But you know it is surreal, being here. I was sort of viewing a retirement home as being sort of a sign that my work was done, but instead...”

“Eh, work is never done. Besides, isn’t it better to enjoy it now, before you’re old and worn out?”

“Without a doubt. Really I ought to have come up here more often before.”

“Really, what we should have done was moved all our shit up here that very Monday and just stayed here ‘til someone tracked us down,” Ryuko countered.

“Wouldn’t’ve worked. That was the day that enemy kamui attacked and the war began, remember?”

“Oh yeah. Wow, REVOCS has just the worst timing, don’t they?”

Satsuki chuckled, “Hmm, but then if they hadn’t you wouldn’t be Queen. And we would never have needed military to access to Australia so we would never have gone to that stupid party and then we’d never have outed ourselves, and you’d never have gone over to the other side and seen Senketsu either, would you have?”

“Oho my god you’re right!” Ryuko laughed out loud, “Everything that’s happened, all because of that.”

Their conversation began to slow now. Each word felt heavy, like the “bong” of a tolling clock tower. The time was coming. Satsuki said, “We’ve been dragged along by circumstance, haven’t we?”

“Yeah. Just reacting as stuff happened to us.”

“I for one am not interested in carrying on like that.”

“Me neither.”

They both reach into their pockets with their free hands, hearts in their throats.

“Ryuko.”

“Satsuki.”

And then they looked each other in the eyes and all at once realized what was happening.

Satsuki’s breath hitched. “No...” she said loudly, voice overcome by sheer disbelief.

Ryuko hardly even thought before she acted. Fast as lightning she dropped to a knee. But her hand caught in her pocket.

Satsuki didn't think either, there was no time, but her reaction was different. Call it a knee jerk effort at self-destruction from the part of her subconscious that still didn't believe she could be happy, or maybe sheer pride that she was being beaten to popping the question, or just that she thought it would make Ryuko laugh to have one last duel over who got this honor. Whatever it was she didn't know; all she knew was this powerful swirl of emotions she couldn't name and then suddenly-

She tackled Ryuko.

"Uh-oh - Aagh!" And then suddenly they were rolling on the ground, wrestling, Ryuko with her glowing gold cherry blossom crown still floating pristine around her head, Satsuki with fresh-cut grass stains on her skirt. It was a desperate struggle, pins and reversals, flailing kicks and squirming.

Mataro couldn't pretend he wasn't listening in anymore. Without even an "I'll be back," for the cousins he was playing soccer with he bolted towards the house, clearing the hedge around the patio and skidding to a halt in the lounge where the rest of the gang were having a couple cocktails and waiting for dessert.

"Hey, um, hey guys? Something's happening!"

"It's happening?" Nonon asked, tilting an eyebrow as she suddenly hurried to finish her drink.

"It's happening!" Mako shrieked.

"I mean, I dunno I dunno. They're fighting so I dunno. Just, c'mon, you need to take a look."

Without a moment's hesitation they were all up, Mako and Ira, Nonon and Uzu, Houka busily texting Shiro (who would later claim he'd seen it all coming and wasn't too upset he'd missed it), and Tsumgu and Aoi shutting the door behind them. They crossed the lawn just in time to see Ryuko summon just enough of her superhuman strength to gently but convincingly pin Satsuki to the ground.

Satsuki angled a challenging look at Ryuko as she tested her bonds, as if to say "*Well? What now?*". But her face changed to horror when she didn't see the flush of triumph and passion she was expecting in Ryuko's expression, but fury. Then she realized they had an audience.

"Y-you... jerk!" Ryuko shouted, forehead furrowed and face beet red. She sprung to her feet and into the air and suddenly she was just an angry dot hovering above the lake. Her Kisaragi wings were out, and she seemed to have let a few extra layers loose. Gouts of fire shot from her hands, blasting away at nothing, a visible manifestation of this tension she'd been building all day and never had a chance to vent.

Everyone ran up to Satsuki, but she didn't make any move to stand or address them. She just rolled over and made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a wheeze as that same tension escaped her body. There was a noise like a general gasp that passed through the group. How to even interpret what had happened?



Nonon immediately rounded on Mataro, “Okay, so what the fuck?”

“Yeah what the f- I, uh, Ryuko! Come back down! It’s okay!” Mako shouted, but she didn’t look like she thought it was okay. She looked genuinely angry, and it was kind of terrifying to behold.

Mataro kept it cool and explained as calmly as he could, “Well they saw they were both going for the rings at the same time, but Ryuko beat her to it, so Satsuki jumped on her.” When they all looked over at Satsuki for an explanation, she just nodded.

“WHY! What could have made you *do* something like that!” Mako yelled, shaking her by the shoulders, “Did you get stupid all of a sudden?”

“I thought she’d think it was funny. To fight over who gets to do it.” In Satsuki’s chest there was just cold acceptance, so strong it almost bordered on relief. *Just take responsibility. Ryuko will be upset for a couple days, but then she’ll come around. We can try it again in a month or so.*

“Why would she think that was *funny*?”

“We’re always doing stuff like that,” Satsuki said simply, “When we’re alone.”

“And did you *know* she wrote a whole speech? That she’s been working on it basically since the election?”

“She did? She has?”

“Oh and what, you haven’t?”

“No, no I did, I just can’t believe she managed to with without me noticing,” Satsuki sighed, “Oh, nevermind. We can try it again in month.”

Mako looked up at the rest of them, mouth agape. Everyone else was similarly at a loss. None of it made any sense, not that Satsuki had felt compelled to sabotage everything, not that Ryuko hadn’t been able to roll with it. Was it possible that in this relationship was doomed somehow? It wasn’t like any of them understood what it was that drew Ryuko and Satsuki together in the first place, maybe this was just some short lived passionate fling, and now that they’d tried and failed to go for commitment the cracks were showing? That made more sense than the possibility that Satsuki had been frightened by how much she wanted it.

Except that Nonon and Mako did understand. “Here, let me see that,” She gently levered the little black box from Satsuki’s hand and opened it, making sure it was at an angle so everyone else could see. Black and smooth with a transparent texture of interlocking fibers that looked like natural crystal growth polished down, with a single large diamond.

“It’s tungsten, so it won’t melt when she does that,” Satsuki pointed at the flames wreathing Ryuko’s body as she calmly explained, “It still might if she goes hot enough, but it’s the best I can do short of hardened life-fibers.”

Nonon crouched down eye to eye with her, put a hand on Satsuki’s shoulder, and said, “She’s getting that today, you hear?”

“No, that’s alright. I appreciate your concern, I do, but I misunderstood her intent. This was my mistake, and I’ll find a way to make it up to her. We’ll try it again when the time is right.”

“Bullshit,” Nonon looked back at the gang, realized she was their leader now and so it was time to step up yet again. She made a split second decision to go out on a limb and came right out with her suspicion, “You weren’t gonna find the courage to do it, and if she did then you’d just sabotage it again.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah. You still think what you’re doing is wrong, and you’re scared that this is the point where we’re gonna finally turn our backs on you. Well sorry, it ain’t happening.”

“I’m offended you’d even think it,” Houka said.

“That’s right,” Uzu agreed, “Honestly, I never even saw much of a problem with it.”

He elbowed Ira, who spoke up then and said, “I feel sorry we had to find out second hand. All the years we’ve fought together, all the secrets we’ve shared, and still one little dark secret about your personal life is too much? But it made me realize that the one thing that’s more important to you than her is that you don’t lose our respect. Lose *us*. Well, that’s never going to happen. Mako, we should get Lady Satsuki a do-over on this whole sorry situation, shouldn’t we?” Mako, sufficiently moved by Satsuki’s obvious sincerity, nodded firmly.

“No, it’s alright, really,” Satsuki said, but her eyes were glassy.

“It is alright, because it’s already done. Just forget all this ever happened. Only question is, who’s going to talk to Ryuko?”

~~~~~

“Hey.”

“Surprised she sent you.”

“Excuse me but *I* sent me,” Nonon huffed, arms crossed as she hovered above the water a couple paces in front of Ryuko.

“Shouldn’t even be here. If you guys hadn’t come along I’d’ve just dusted me off, told her that wasn’t cool, and then we’d’ve talked it out.”

“So what the hell was wrong with doing that anyway? If you told us to leave, we would’ve, you know.”

“It’s embarrassing! A proposal is supposed to look romantic and shit and instead like everyone comes storming out and sees us rolling in the dirt! I mean, how the hell did you all know anyway? Actually, no, don’t answer that, I’m sure Mako told you, it doesn’t matter.”

Nonon chuckled, “The kicker is that Satsuki had Ira bring her *your* ring too, isn’t that fun?”

Ryuko rubbed her face, “God fucking damn. Well, whatever. Maybe you can at least tell me why. I mean, okay we happened to have the same idea to propose on the same day, but *why*.”

“She said she thought you’d find it funny,” Nonon shrugged, “I take it no.”

“Did you just come up here to jerk me around? What do you think? I try to do something romantic, something she’ll *like*, and just because she had her own plan she takes it as an invitation to do the whole ‘who’s on top’ routine,” Ryuko’s face froze, “How much did she tell you about that?”

“Not enough for me to care. Look, it’s not like you’re a saint in this either, you were the one who started to try and beat her to it before she even pounced, Mataro saw the whole thing!”

“Well I mean...” Ryuko tried to protest, but it was no good. Her face and tone of voice softened considerably, and she said, “Yeah okay, I did that. I dunno, I just got all caught up in my thing, alright?”

“I can see that. Have you considered that she was in basically the same mindset?”

“ ‘Course. That’s what so fucked about it, I mean I was scared somethin’ was gonna go wrong but if I’d known beforehand then I’d’ve known not to try and – y’know, I dunno.”

“That didn’t make any sense. Slow down.”

Ryuko did slow it down, motioning with her hands as though it helped, “I knew I was going to mess something up, I was ready for that, but if I’d known we were both gonna then I woulda stopped way before and we coulda just talked thing’s out.”

“Neither of you did anything wrong you know. You’re just idiots. But you must know something I don’t because you’re so dead certain Satsuki was gonna beef it too,” Nonon quipped skeptically.

“Oh, I do, I do. I know this shit is hard Nonon. You’ll see, you’ll see.”

“No, actually I won’t. That’s the thing about us straights, you see you have to do this whole song and dance to figure out who plays what role, but I get to leave everything to Uzu,” She said smugly, “I am prepared for disappointment, don’t worry.”

Despite herself Ryuko smiled, “Didn’t realize you two were at that point.”

“Or maybe not. I mean, it’s not like we’re in *love* or something cheesy like that. But it’s not like you’re gonna find a better man in our neighborhood either, eh? All I’m saying is I don’t know anything about how hard it is to hold out a ring and say four words.”

“Well it’s hard man, think it might be the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Nonon began.

“If you’re gonna say something about Honnouji I swear.”

“No, actually I was gonna say college,” Nonon said. Watching Ryuko crack up from that one was oddly satisfying.”

“Oh! Hehehe... Yeah, alright, you got me. So, what’s the plan, you made sure I’m okay now what?”

“Well first off, you are okay, right?”

“Wha- of course I’m okay!”

“You’re sure you’re not mad or anything?”

“Geez, you don’t get it at all!” Ryuko exclaimed, “It’s gonna be okay, we’ll just agree who gets to do theirs first and then do it over in a week or whatever.”

“Well what about doing it over tonight?”

“What, did she say that she wants to?” Ryuko asked coolly, but the effect was immediate. There was a spark in her eyes, suddenly a little color in her cheeks.

“Yup. She’s waiting right now. Like it never happened. And you go first.”

“And did you guys-,”

“Ira and Mako, mostly. You can thank them later.”

“My heroes.” Ryuko thought quietly for a moment, and then finally said, “Yeah, screw it. You get it your way.”

Nonon blinked, “Wow, that was easy.”

“Yeah? Only one condition though. No interference from the peanut gallery this time.”

“Hey, you’re the queen. Now c’mon, don’t make us late for dessert, they’re serving Tiramisu. And after that I think you owe us all a drink or two.”

~~~~~

Of course, expecting privacy was a fool’s errand. There were security cameras all around, and their phones in their pockets could provide audio. Misaki was playing a live feed to the gang inside, but it wasn’t like they knew that.

“I should apologize,” Satsuki said.

“No, nothing to apologize for,” Ryuko shuffled, still a little nervous, hand clenched in her pocket. “I think, if I’d had a little warning, then yeah it would’ve been pretty funny.”

Satsuki smiled, profound happiness rushing through her. At that moment she felt like the spell was broken, all the formality stripped away.

“At this point I... kinda feel like the words don’t matter,” Ryuko said, “But I spent a lot of time on ‘em.”

Satsuki stepped closer until they were as close to touching as practically possible. She said softly, “Please, I want to hear it. I feel terrible that we couldn’t do it properly the first time.”

“Yeah, well, doing it properly’s overrated. Too stressful.”

“All too right. Now...”

Ryuko took a deep breath, stepped back just enough to stand up straight. “Alright, let me see. Ahem – ‘It’s so hard for me to think now about the time before our lives were joined together. It doesn’t feel like anything from the time before I met you matters, and thinking about when we first met, that hurts and’ ah hell with it I’m just gonna paraphrase. Look. First time I sat down to write what I was gonna say I wrote about every little thing, our duels and each time we had one of our little staredowns and how it made me feel, but all that was too long and ‘sides it’s pointless. I don’t want to think about the past, it’s the future that matters. But there is one that I do like, one I kept. Do you remember the first time you smiled at me? And I’m not talking like taunting me or in battle or anything I mean a real, actual smile? You can – you can answer that.”

“Why I’m... not sure that I do.”

“It wasn’t when we were about to go off and fight Ragyo together, no, thought that one was good too. It was before that, when were all eating together on the deck of that damn ship. Remember?”

“That was really it? I suppose that I do but I wouldn’t never have thought.”

“I felt like my heart was gonna stop right then and there. Senketsu wouldn’t stop making fun of me for it all night,” Ryuko chuckled warmly as she remembered, “And all I’d done was passed the salt. And it wasn’t like a big moment or anything, but I definitely remember thinking to myself, ‘she’s got the most beautiful smile on Earth’. And now what I’m saying is this – is that I’m gonna see that smile every single day from now until the day it really does stop my heart and makes me mortal just so I can die in your arms. Every day, that smile. And yeah there’s gonna be times I make you angry or make you cry or you do the same to me and it won’t always be easy but it doesn’t matter. It’s worth it. Just to make you smile every day. And I don’t know what else our future will hold, hell if I coulda predicted this morning that this is how today was gonna go, but I’m not worrying about that so long as I have you. And I, uh, guess I kinda blew past my neat little transition sentence but,” At the last minute, she knelt down on a knee and produced the ring. Shiny red, smooth and lustrous like metal, it was made of hardened life-fibers from her own body.

“Satsuki, marry me.”

And even though Satsuki knew it was coming she still had to bring a hand to her mouth to stifle a gasp. It was like a floodgate opening and all of a sudden it was *real*, like it never could have been before.

“Ohh, Ryuko,” She managed, overcome by it all. *I never thought this day would come*, the words kept rattling in her head. She felt dizzy, she felt dimly aware of how hard it was to blink back the tears, but above all she felt *Ryuko* as she rushed into her arms. “Yes, yes, yesyesyes,” She blurted desperately, as though if she didn’t right then and there it might somehow all evaporate into thin air. But Ryuko kissed her as she slid the ring on, a perfect fit. Then the waterworks really started.

“We did it,” Ryuko whispered. “Well, halfway, but it’s a start.”

Over Ryuko’s shoulder, Satsuki kept looking at her hand, her finger with that shimmering red band. Her chest kept pounding, and she could feel Ryuko’s pounding too. The feeling washed over her and she felt like a completely new woman, one who wasn’t afraid of whatever this feeling was that kept pulling, pulling her as though she still wasn’t close enough to Ryuko. She basked in it. Let it sink away and absorb all thoughts, all fears. Just *Ryuko*.

“I’m so *happy*,” She finally realized.

“Sheesh. If this is what proposing is like, I can’t imagine the damn wedding,” Ryuko joked, but there were tears on her cheeks too.

When they’d pulled themselves together, Ryuko straightened herself away from Satsuki, looking into her eyes with arms around her hips and said, “Is it stupid if I say I still feel like a kid playing at being grown up? I mean, no way *I* could be *engaged*, especially not when I’m actually in love. I guess I’ll just have to grow into it.”

“Hmhmhm,” Satsuki hummed, “I feel stupid too. I was afraid today, and I don’t even know of what. Nothing’s changed.”

“Huh?”

“Well, it’s just that this little event doesn’t change. We’ll be together for the rest of my life, but that was true before, probably it has been true for a long time. Today was just a formality, right?”

“Oh, totally,” Ryuko agreed.

“It’s just one people tend to place a great deal of importance on. And I let myself get caught up in that. But now... well, I guess I do sort of appreciate the certainty.”

“I thought you might. Never known Satsuki *Matoi* to scoff at any kind of guarantee. But does that mean you’re past wanting to do your half the proposal?”

“It does seem rather blasé at this point,” Satsuki admitted with a sheepish smile.

“No, no. I mean, if you had something planned, I... wanna see it.”

“Well, if you insist. But I don’t intend to paraphrase anything,” Satsuki unthreaded herself from Ryuko, the anxiety gone. Yes, she did feel like at some point, somehow, she’d passed a great boundary from the girl she’d been to the woman she was now and had only just realized it. She took a deep breath and stood on the edge of the lake, right between Ryuko and the setting sun. With a distant *\*clunk\**, floodlights suddenly leapt to life around the edge of the lake, silhouetting her in a warm, soft glow of orange sunlight and white electric bulbs.

“Whoa...” Ryuko mouthed.

“ ‘I will do whatever it takes, so long as I know my actions are utterly pure’. That is what I’ve always said, and what I’ve always believed,” Satsuki said loudly, standing straight and looking away from Ryuko, out across the lake, “But what is purity? To fight to save our world, or for the poor and the vulnerable, that is purity. I can do that, that is what I was *born* to do. But loving you, Ryuko, that has been much more challenging,” She tilted her head towards Ryuko, to see her smirking affectionately.

“Gee, you can really turn the ‘old Satsuki’ on and off like a faucet, can’t you?”

“Oh, you!” Satsuki pretended like she was frustrated, but when she turned around she was laughing, none of that cold scowling but instead the beautiful smile, the crinkled up corners of her eyes that Ryuko so adored. And she laughed and said, “Shut up, I’m going somewhere with it!”

“Okay, okay, don’t mind me!”

Satsuki snapped back to her pageantry, but this time a little softer, stern but not brutally so. “But how could I feel pure loving you, Ryuko? How could I feel pure knowing what chaos we have caused by being together? How could I feel pure when I know how gleeful I feel that you chose me, how I *burned* with jealousy when I saw you with the other women who’ve caught your eye? How could I feel pure doing something which is just for myself? I was... ashamed.”

Ryuko shook her head wonderingly, *don’t you know you are helping so many people? You think I could be Queen with you to help me, reassure me I can do it?* She wanted to say it, but she had a feeling Satsuki was going somewhere better with all this. And besides, it was nice to hear her admit to feelings of jealousy – it always was, Ryuko didn’t know why.

Satsuki knew that Ryuko could see the phone in her sleeve, the subtle press of a button giving a signal to cut the floodlights. One by one they fell, until it was just Ryuko and Satsuki in the purple evening gloom.

“Sats...” Ryuko said tenderly.

Now Satsuki let her entire poise relax, all pretense of the old Satsuki dropped, “And I can’t accept that. My shame at being ashamed is even stronger. I don’t know how to live with it yet, I still feel afraid deep in my irrational core that somehow all of this will vanish on me, and yet... I can’t deny the truth. I *love* you, Ryuko,” Satsuki said, voice near breaking. “It’s frightening, it really, *really* is. Because that means I can’t get that purity back. But that vain pursuit of glory, it would have led to a premature death and my memory spat upon as a war criminal. You saved me from that fate. And for that, for that *alone*, there is nothing I can do but tie my life to yours forever. I don’t know if I know how to give the pursuit up, but I will learn, for you.”

“Jesus,” Ryuko sniffed involuntarily. It hit her just as the reality of the situation had hit Satsuki just before, how much that meant. It took someone who knew Satsuki as intimately as she did to understand that it was true, everything Satsuki did was in service to others. Her life was dedicated to nothing else but making the world a better place, she knew no other way. And yet she would give it all up, for Ryuko, if that was what Ryuko desired. Obviously it wasn’t, but *still*.

“Ryuko - and as a disclaimer I’m aware this is somewhat incongruous considering I’m the one who would take your name but – will you marry me?” There was the little black box, there it clicked open, and there was the smooth band of tungsten with its single, perfectly cut diamond. Ryuko rushed up.

“Satsuki, you... I mean, I just... god, you’re so cool.”

Satsuki smirked, “It’s a yes or no question Ryuko.”

“Oh, shut up. Yes, of course of course,” She took the ring from Satsuki’s hand, slipped it on, admired its simple elegance. “Y’know I... think maybe I see now why you were so frustrated I was going to beat you to it.”

“Is that right? Well, if you think I’m cool now, you’re going to love this,” Satsuki pressed another button on her phone. And suddenly there was a succession of small explosions across the lake in the darkened forests, and then some instantly recognizable screeching noises.



Fireworks.

“No...” Ryuko clapped a hand over her mouth as Satsuki took her hand and turned to stand beside her to watch the display. Red, amber, white, they exploded at the same time that unseen teams of pyrotechnicians lit bonfires about the shore, roaring to life with orange light, vivid and alive with dancing variation. The burning glow lit up the evening sky and the darkened landscape far, far more than the floodlights ever could have. The metaphor wasn’t lost on Ryuko. Flaming red orange was her color. She was the light of Satsuki’s life now.

She leaned on Satsuki’s shoulder and murmured in astonishment, “And you were going to just pack this all up and try again some other time?”

Satsuki hum-chuckled and she said, “Ryuko, you forget. I really, *really* love you. And also, we happen to be very, *very* rich.”

NOTE: Now that I know how to put pictures in these I cannot be stopped. This is the vibe I imagine for this lakeside mansion only if this was just like one tiny, tiny little section of it. Place is massive







# Scenes from a Kamui Nest: 1

## Chapter Summary

The more saccharine than I'd originally intended section.

As ever, it has grown too big and real life too busy. Ideally part 2 very very very soon.

Also planting some seeds and doing some callbacks. Y'know, for fun.

Discord: EnhLut\_spare#5463

November 2067

~~~~~

A lot in Ryuko's life since her coronation was new, shockingly so, and so she was quite happy to find herself back in the magnetic containment field deep in the lab, making new kamui. It was comforting, the familiarity, and now that she had the hang of it not at all difficult either. It made for a nice break in her day where she could zone out and just chat with whoever was in the observation chamber.

"Hey, who's that new guy who's workin' out with Mataro in the gym today? He's kinda cute, but also looks like a tough guy, huh? Crazy tan on him, too."

"You know somethin' Mako?" Ryuko chuckled, not looking that much like she was working since she didn't use her hands to thread the life-fibers, "If you don't say someone's cute when you first meet them I start to worry you don't like them."

"Whaaat? No way, I'm not *that* predictable!" Mako tapped her pencil emphatically. "I just call 'em like I see 'em!"

"Well, anyway, that's Yuda Uwais. Y'know, the guide the gang had down in Indonesia? Good guy, saved Satsuki's life once. And he's been doing well at the training too."

"Mhm! And that's gonna be his kamui?"

"Nah, this one's Mataro's. Though at this stage, they'd all look the same to you anyway. I'm just laying down the banshi."

"Kinda like the foundations," Mako concluded.

"Right. Actually, I was gonna ask you, I drew up some designs for 'er, and I wanna see which you think he'll like most."

"Ooh! It has to make him look *cool*, that's all he cares about. 'Sides from that... base color's gotta be black, and then some highlight, right? Something gold or yellowy I think."

“Yeah, I was thinking something like that,” Ryuko nodded. She’d talked about fashion to Mako enough that she could guess at what was going on in Ryuko’s head. “I designed a suit, one that looks like a ninja-yoroi, one that kinda combos those, and then there’s this other one with this big jacket and - Here, my notebook’s in the room with you, take a peek.”

“One sec,” Mako said, still furiously writing, “So this’s just the powered down form? What about when they transform?”

“Who knows? Actually though, the only way to find out is to put her on him and give her enough blood to wake up. It’s like it’s an innate thing, maybe its genetic, I dunno we’ve never made kamui for people who were related before,” Mako nodded, looking kind of wistful. “What? You’re jealous, aren’t you?”

“Wouldn’t you be? I wanna see what my kamui looks like! If it’s as special as a fingerprint, why wouldn’t I? Plus, I see like every day how Ira and Tekketsu are always talking to each other about any old thing. Not that I’m jealous of her, no I totally get it, but *I* want that!”

“Hey, you don’t gotta tell me, I totally get it,” Ryuko nodded, “Believe me I got nothing against you having a kamui, that was never my problem.”

“Ira says he doesn’t want me ta’ have to kill anybody, and obvs you don’t either, but that’s beside the point.”

“It is. Tell the truth, having a kamui is something where if I had the power and the time, everyone in the world would experience it. Everyone *ought* to, especially you. No, I’m more worried about putting you in the line of fire than giving you the power to kill someone.”

“The line of fire? Someone tried to snipe me on my way home from school, just a week ago!” Mako exclaimed.

“Yeah, but our spies got ‘em while he was still setting up,” Ryuko shrugged, but Mako looked, well, less than convinced, and Ryuko immediately felt guilty. That was fine when it was Satsuki, who was attuned to danger and was usually right next to Ryuko anyway. Mako shouldn’t have to live her life constantly shying away from windows. “Alright, fair point.” Ryuko stood up from her chair, tapping out a series of commands on the computer screen in front of her so that Mataro’s partially finished kamui folded into a much stronger, tighter magnetic containment field and disappeared into her storage unit. Ryuko still remembered fondly the moment when she’d felt the first flicker of its aura, a new life beginning. She took one of the spare vials from her control panel, filled with pure Mataro DNA – extracted from his blood and artificially multiplied, and crossed over into the break room where Mako was sitting, where she dumped its contents out in the lab sink and carefully rinsed it in a stream of deionized water. “Here, be careful with this,” Ryuko said furtively to Mako, offering her a swiss-army knife from her pocket. “Just give me a little drop of your blood.”

Mako’s eyes went wide, “Oooohhhhhh *boy!*” The reality that Ryuko was going to hide some of her DNA away and give life to her kamui in secret was hitting her. And it made her hands shake a little bit. “Er, Ryuko, don’t you think you should do it?”

Ryuko’s face blanched. “N-no, that’s alright. You really ought to be the one who-“

~\*\**Ahem*\* *Now just what is going on here, if you don’t mind?*” ~ It was Izanami, lighting up the computer terminal Mako was sitting at with her simulated face, not looking too

happy.

“AAAh!” Mako shouted, dropping the swiss-army knife altogether, “Izanami! Uh, hi!”

~ *“Because it looks to me like you were going to save some of Mako’s blood to make a kamui. Is that right? And Ryuko, quite frankly I don’t know how you brought that metal into the magnetic containment field without it exploding, but never do it again!”* ~ Izanami piped insistently.

“Well, uh, yeah. That’s exactly what we were doing. I just wanna put it on file, for later when we beat REVOCS and every kamui doesn’t have to be a combat model. Is there a problem with that?”

Ryuko could feel Izanami’s reaction around her. Both, *Yes, it would be nice if our lives weren’t born from and absorbed by the battle against REVOCS, against the monster that controls them. A kamui who was born only to enjoy and learn about this world would be one I’d like to meet and, but yet, we are kamui.* Maybe one of the other kamui would have been more disturbed to directly confront the fact that they were made only to fulfill a military necessity, but Izanami was more logical than that and besides, Shiro had started work on her long before out of pure curiosity. So Izanami responded, ~ *“No, there’s no problem. Only, that is not sterile at all. Let me take care of it.”* ~

Without a moment’s hesitation, the terminal Mako was sitting at unfurled a long mechanical arm equipped with a syringe. Faster than she could react, a needle plunged into Mako’s arm and filled the syringe with her blood, she didn’t even feel a sting before the red vial was deposited in Ryuko’s hand so she could confirm it was real. It was as good as a confirmation to Mako to see Ryuko standing there, shaking the red vial proudly. She murmured, “Whoaaaaa...”

“Mark my word, Mako. As soon as I can. And, you,” She addressed Izanami, “You said that ‘deionized’ meant the water was totally sterile!”

~ *“Well, that’s not entirely accurate, but... look, we’ll cover it next time you come down for tutoring,”* ~ Izanami said sheepishly, realizing she hadn’t explained chemistry to Ryuko as well as she’d thought. ~ *“But just leave that blood in your terminal, Ryuko if you please, and don’t worry about a thing!”* ~

Ryuko did Izanami instructed, but didn’t return to work. “It’s break time,” she declared, and reclined at a computer terminal as she watched Mako continue with her homework, no show of how excited she was to know that she was one step closer to getting her own kamui.

In a few minutes she slammed her pencil down and proudly declared, “Hey, Ryuuuko! Guess what!”

“What?”

“I’m done! Got everything I set out for today done!”

“Oh yeah?” Ryuko smiled, “So what’ve you been doing all morning anyway?”

“Well take a look!” Mako proudly waved a pack of notecards in her hand, “It’s for this marketing class I have. They’ve got all these crazy words for stuff I feel like I coulda just said simpler, like ‘bounce rate’ and ‘market saturation’, but you gotta keep them straight for the test.”

“You don’t say.”

“Yup! Ira’ll help me study’em later tonight when he gets home,” Almost immediately Mako was on her phone, snapping a quick picture of herself with the notecards, cutesy handwriting with extra curls and little flowers on display. Ryuko watched over her shoulder as she typed out an upbeat message about how she was staying focused and ready for the test, capped off with a little gritted-teeth stressed-out face. Ryuko smiled peacefully as she watched Mako operate her little social media empire. Then Mako put the notecards away with a relieved sigh. “Just three weeks ‘til finals! I got this!”

“You know that the second you graduate Nonon’s gonna hire you to be the kamui corps’ publicity manager, right?” Ryuko knew that despite Mako’s general positive air there were plenty of times when college was more than a little stressful. “It’s not like you need the degree. I mean, she sure doesn’t, and neither do I, and hell Satsuki doesn’t even have one come to think of it. Not yet, anyway.”

“How’s that going, by the by?”

“Eh, they gave her basically unlimited time to write the dissertation, so she’s been getting it done bit by bit. She’ll get it done,” Ryuko said, nodding with absolute certainty. “But seriously, you ever get the feeling like you just don’t wanna do this college shit anymore you know you don’t need it, right? Plus, then you could come with me and Sats to tour the League. We’re going to New Guinea this weekend, and they say the ash hasn’t really been too bad there. Mako, you really owe it to yourself to see a rainforest sometime, seriously. Even the ones in Vietnam, which’re mostly chopped down, were just like, *wow*. You can take a couple days off, right?”

Mako frowned, “I don’t think you *really* want me third wheeling.”

“Ah, don’t think of it like that. I mean, what we should really do is a family vacation come your winter break, right?”

“Oh, for sure!” Mako nodded, springing up to plop down next to Ryuko, nestling in until she was basically in her lap, grabbing Ryuko’s notebook off the desk. “So, you don’t miss it?”

“Huh?”

“College. ‘Cuz I know I gripe but I’m gonna stick it out until the end. Like I know I don’t need it, not like I’m tryin’ to get a different job, why would I, but this’s the best I’ve ever done in school! I kinda feel like I got this far, I wanna say I achieved it.”

Ryuko frowned. “I do kinda wish I’d stuck with it too. Just ‘cuz I, y’know, never really saw myself being able to,” Ryuko said wistfully.

“Awww.”

“But like, that’s it. I didn’t really have any other reason. Classes in my major were basically just for socializing and honestly, I’d rather hang with Sats and you and the rest of the gang. And everything else sucked big time. No, being queen is better, it’s true.”

“Why’m I not surprised,” Mako chirped.

“But like, day to day it’s honestly the biggest load off my mind. Always some deadline hanging over your head. Essay the end of the week, exam the end of the month, projects and shit. And it sucked to see those Cs on my transcript and just be thinking how actually I failed but they just wouldn’t dare let me actually fail. I shoulda been kicked out after my first year!”

“Hmm,” Mako murmured. This was the first time Ryuko had directly admitted even to her just how bad she’d done in college, but Mako had of course known. “But then, you do have a *big* deadline coming up, huh?”

“February 11<sup>th</sup>,” Ryuko said wonderingly, as though it were the answer to life itself. Because at this point, to her, even The Thing Behind The Veil suddenly vanishing from it endless vigil on the distant horizon would only be marginally better. “God damn it’s still such a wait. And everyone was saying we should wait ‘til the spring. No way, absolutely no way.”

“You must be so excited!” Mako said, spreading Ryuko’s fingers so she could admire the ring, “*I’m* so excited so I can only imagine!”

“Yeah...”

“Whatcha thinkin’?” Mako asked, seeing that Ryuko seemed pensive about something.

“I dunno, I’m just not sure about the venue is all. I mean, The Monument is cool, but for *my* wedding? It ain’t how I pictured it. But it’s the only place that’s big enough to handle the crowds.”

Mako screwed up her face in confusion, “But we can just change it! I don’t mind redoing the planning, really we barely started.”

“I know, thank you. But let’s face it, my wedding is gonna be a national event, it’s gotta be able to accommodate almost as many people as the coronation.”

“Why? Why’s that gotta be true? Let’s scrap that whole thing and pick out a temple someplace. Somewhere romantic! I guarantee ya everyone who matters will fit.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Gotta be this way,” Ryuko shook her head. But she could see Mako’s mouth curled into a resolute little frown.

“No. It’s *your* day Ryuko. You only get the one.”

Ryuko smiled and ruffled Mako’s hair. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll talk to Sats, see if I can’t change her mind too.”

Mako grinned and made a little happy noise. “Oh, speaking of people who matter, you did talk to Mom and Dad, right?”

“Oh... yeah, I thought I told you about that. Probably shoulda sooner, but I think the engagement made it all real.”

~~~~~

*The week before*

~~~~~

It was rare enough even before they got engaged for Ryuko and Satsuki to be apart, so when Ryuko told her she had to talk to the Mankanshoku parents about something without her it wasn't hard for her to guess she was a part of that. Not that she disagreed – it was long overdue for a serious discussion – but before the exchange of rings it was easier to take a don't ask, don't tell attitude towards the whole thing. So Satsuki made herself scarce, but not before reassuring Ryuko she had nothing to worry about. "They love you. Don't pretend they're unaware of how uncomfortable this all must be for you."

Ryuko found Barazo and Sukuyo sitting in a second – story courtyard that opened on one side to view the lake. Now that they'd gotten over their initial empty-nester period (and had moved into a much bigger and less empty nest, which suited them just fine) they were adjusting well to an early retirement. There were kids playing, who Sukuyo was half watching while she read a book. She'd never had the luxury of time to do that before. Meanwhile, Barazo was playing cards with a group of his relations, some kind of fast-paced game that involved lots of luck and chance and slamming cards on the table with triumphant laughter. Hardly anybody stopped what they were doing when Ryuko arrived, and she smiled at that. How it should be.

"Hey-hey! Have a seat kiddo, we'll deal ya in!" Barazo shouted as she strolled over. And Ryuko couldn't resist, she played a few rounds before she finally managed to drag her adoptive parents to a more secluded nook.

"So look," She began, tapping her fingers on the balcony and trying to look calm, "I know I've done a lot 'a stuff lately you probably wished I'd came to you about first. I mean, with all this..." She tapped the softly glowing cherry blossoms about her head, "And this," She waved Satsuki ring illustratively, "It all came at me kinda fast, and then... well honestly I got no excuse. I just felt so shitty 'cuz you guy's have always been there for me and here I am doing things I *know* you're gonna disapprove of, really it's just ungrateful of me. So, it's too late to undo anything, but you gotta give me a chance to make it right if I can."

They both looked at her, blinked and then smiled, laughing a little at her nervousness. Barazo said, "What, that's it? I mean, not like we adopted you to stop you from getting into politics."

Ryuko looked stunned, so Sukuyo said, "It's true. You've been doing great, dear. People really are happy to have you. It's sweet, actually. And I think this whole thing with REVOCS, and the volcanoes –,"

"– Much less scary to know you're on it," Barazo finished her thought confidently.

"But, all this," She waved out across the mansion, "I mean isn't this a bit like with the fight club? The luxury kinda driving us apart?"

Already she was starting to feel like that was a hollow question. At Honnouji, when Ryuko and Mako had won rank promotion to two-star through the fight club, the whole family was so dazzled by the riches that they decked themselves in fine clothes. Now, Barazo and Sukuyo were dressed more or less the same as ever, except shedding the tie and the apron.

"You kiddin'?" I haven't gotten to hang 'round with my kid brother this much since he was in grade school!" Barazo said.

"And you're here every day, and Mako and Mataro almost as much. Just when I was starting to get worried, I wouldn't get you back. Not like we need all this, but since you already had it just going to waste, it is nice."

Ryuko blushed a little bit, embarrassed by how genuine that was. “Well, I – geez alright. But then what about Satsuki? You can’t tell me you don’t have a problem with *that*.”

They did have a problem with that. Ryuko could tell by the crack in their casual, upbeat veneer they would’ve been just as happy as her never talking about it. “Well, you see...”

“Well, yes-,”

“At first-,”

“No, not at first, *still*,” Barazo said, and Sukuyo flashed him a reproachful look. “*We talked about this!*” It said. He rubbed the back of his thick head awkwardly, “Ah gee, how to put this. It’s not good. I mean, why not Mako? Or Rei?” He seemed to genuinely want to understand.

Ryuko’s mouth dried up, prepared responses forgotten, “Well, I mean, that’s not what Mako and I wanted back then, you know that, and with Rei it’s just... It wasn’t the same. I really couldn’t go back that day when we first told the world, y’know. When I thought that Satsuki might’ve been hurt, might’ve died, I couldn’t hide it from myself anymore. I just don’t love Rei the same way. Don’t think it didn’t fuck me up, but.... that’s the truth.”

That prompted quiet from Barazo. A part of her had suspected he’d be more understanding, but once she went from vagrant girl with badass powers to his daughter, once that had really sunk in, the rules changed. But by the same token – not that Ryuko knew it – but both he and Sukuyo had wished they could be more comfortable with her and Satsuki together from the moment they first found out. That was the kind of response that tugged at his heart just a bit, but behind that unusually thoughtful look on his face he was trying hard to not cave in immediately.

“No, it’s not good,” Sukuyo sighed, “but... oh, how to explain. Look, my parents were... not happy when we had Mako.”

Barazo nodded solemnly, “Yeah, and neither were mine when I dropped outta med school for her.”

“Wait,” Ryuko said, shocked, “You’re telling me Mako was-,”

“Not intentional. Yes,” Sukuyo said gravely, clearly not happy with the words, “Nobody believed us when we said we’d make it work out, that we didn’t see it as a mistake. Especially not our parents. And we don’t want to be those parents too.”

“That’s right,” Barazo said, “We’re gonna stand with you, even if it’s hard for us to understand.”

“You are?”

“Mhm. Since Mako came along, our children have sort of been our project,” Sukuyo said.

“But we always knew they wouldn’t have many options, let’s be real. So we kinda, y’know, tried to make sure they were the kind of people who’d be okay with that,” Barazo added.

“Easier with Mako than Mataro,” Sukuyo quipped.



Barazo laughed, “Hah! All too true. Think my mistake was startin’ schooling him on street smarts too young!”

“Then along you come, and after everything *now* look where we are because of that. And I don’t know quite when it happened, but we realized that if fate had robbed you of parents, that was something we could do for you. It’s not too prideful of us if we took it as a reward for how good we did with the other two, is it?” Sukuyo asked, then noticed that Ryuko was tearing up, “Aw, honey what’s wrong?”

“Nuthin’,” Ryuko sniffed, “You’re just so *nice*. How did I get this lucky?”

“Come here,” Sukuyo beckoned with open arms, and Ryuko swept up and hugged them both. “The thing we didn’t realize until you got there was that every kid does things that seem stupid to their parents. Started with Mako running after you everywhere and us scared she’d get herself killed, but she turned out great. Then Mataro and the blindfold, and kamui, but he’s alright too. Right?”

“Better than alright,” Ryuko affirmed confidently.

“And then you turned out to be... well, you.”

“Yeah, it’d never feel right telling you what to do. Really we should’ve known from the start you’d do things that seemed crazy to us,” Barazo agreed. “Besides, why wouldn’t we want Satsuki to be happy, and she’s never seemed like a very happy person in general until now.”

*Surprisingly perceptive.* Ryuko felt a twinge of a powerful feeling that was hard to put her finger on, “She’s got such a nice smile though, doesn’t she? You’re gonna see it more, I promise.”

“Make sure you tell her you got our blessing, alright?” Sukuyo said, “Oh, and that last bit too. Take that as advice.” When Ryuko looked just a tiny bit mortified she said, “Er, have you two talked about it? Children, I mean.”

“God, not in ages,” Ryuko chuckled. “But I know she wants ‘em. We’d probably adopt, sure, but that doesn’t matter. To make some kid’s life so much better than hers? I know for sure she wants that.”

~~~~~

“Hey, Ryuko? Whatcha thinkin’ bout now?” Mako looked up from Ryuko’s notebook to see her staring kind of dreamily off into space.

“Huh? Oh, just somethin’ our folks said. They were very nice about the whole thing, you know.”

“Duh!” Mako giggled, “I don’t know why you were so worried!”

*She has no idea how lucky she is. Or maybe she does, who can say?* Ryuko thought as she took the notebook and began flipping to the plan’s for Mataro’s kamui. *Her parents gave up on their own dreams for her, and they didn’t even see it that way. They were happy to do it.* Even now, the idea still barely fit in Ryuko’s mind. It didn’t make sense, but that was what made it so magical.

Ryuko gave Mako a little peck on the forehead as she said, “Okay, now see here, this one’s the first design.”

## Scenes from a Kamui Nest: 2

### Chapter Summary

Discord: EnhLut\_spare#5463

### Chapter Notes

UPDATE: I'm sorry there was no chapter last week and I didn't post an update! There will be one in the next couple days!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

November 2067

~~~~~

“Okay, now this one I really like. The combination with, like, for example the jacket and the loose pants means it’s kinda got this streetwear vibe which I think he’ll really like. I mean, one step more fancy and cohesive than that. Well-dressed but disorganized, which is the idea because you want to look like you’ve got it in you to look sharp, but you’re a little too laid-back for that,” Ryuko explained to Mako as she pointed to the designs carefully sketched and inked in her notebook.

“Ooh, totally! That’s a good look,” Mako agreed, kicking her legs idly across Ryuko’s lap, “Hey, real quick, smile!”

“Huh?” Ryuko glanced up to see Mako flip her phone camera to selfie mode, grinning as she pressed her cheek against Ryuko’s. Which quickly reddened as she stammered, “Oh, haha, I dunno Mako. I don’t really like my face on... oh what the hell.” She caved in and smiled – and genuinely too – and watched as Mako finished the video and began typing out a caption.

“ ‘Kamui design tips with Ryuko Matoi herself,’ how’s that sound?”

“Pshh, you make it seem like such a big deal.”

“Which you totally are. Should I post it?”

Not like Ryuko would dream of saying no. Mako knew what she was doing, but the idea of having an internet presence scared Ryuko. She didn’t have any intention of fanning her fanatical followers any more than she already did, but that was secondary to the idea of exposing her own daily life to the world. To have strangers see where she lived, where she slept, where she ate, where she got ready for the day – she didn’t care if they were desperate to know about her, it just felt unacceptable. But then Mako asked, totally innocent and unaware of any problem with it. And

all of a sudden Ryuko wanted to believe that there was some little girl out there who admired her more than anything. Who said she wanted to wear a kamui and be a heroine like Ryuko when asked what she wanted to do when she grew up. Who would die happy just because she saw her idol smiling up from her phone. It would make the rest of it worth bearing. And so she said, “Sure, I don’t see why not.”

Mako pressed the send button, and for a moment the loading bar filled up, but then abruptly it stopped. The video disappeared, deleted. Mako frowned, “Hey, what’s up with it?”

~ “*Are you stupid!*” ~ A synthesized voice cut through from the phone, and Mako jumped and nearly dropped it. Suddenly the screen cut to Izanami’s artificial face, and another animated woman, young and fresh faced but taller, with a thin face, pointed chin and sharp, perceptive eyes. If it weren’t for the black hair, she would’ve looked quite like a female version of Houka. ~ “*You can’t go around taking videos in here!*” ~

“AAAH! Izanami! And that must be Misaki too! How’d you get in my phone?”

~ “*That’s besides the point, listen,*” ~ Misaki continued where Izanami left off, ~ “*This room is beyond top secret. It might seem harmless, but if agents from another country found this – which they would – they’d be able to zoom-and-enhance on that complex machine behind you*” ~ She pointed towards the kamui construction chamber. ~ “*And sure, Ryuko is the most important component of it and they don’t have one of those, but that’s still one step closer to people who would kill us if they could having the power to take us on!*” ~

Ryuko frowned. She hadn’t considered that even though she probably should’ve. But she said, “Hey guys, can’t you cut her a little slack? Blur it out or something?”

~ “*Not a chance, I’m afraid,*” ~ A third voice, this time Shiro’s, and below the animated avatars of the two kamui supercomputers his face suddenly appeared, ~ “*Truth is, if we couldn’t monitor your phones we wouldn’t even allow them in here. You may think our security has lapsed, but I can assure you it’s just as strict as ever.*” ~

“Alright, well, y’know Mako didn’t know that, so can we just get the video back?”

“No.”

“Ach, can’t I just like, order you to do it or something? Then it’s on me if something goes wrong.”

~ “*Still no!*” ~

“You’re kidding!”

In unison, Izanami, Misaki, and Shiro all huffed, ~ “*You may be Queen Ryuko, but this is our lab!*”~

Disappointed for Mako’s sake but knowing she ought to have thought of this beforehand, Ryuko shook her head and said, “Yeah, alright, I’m sorry. You think we could go someplace else and record though? Somewhere less top secret?”

~ “*Of course!*” ~ Izanami chirped abruptly, reverting to her usual bubbly good nature almost immediately. ~ “*A little public outreach is always a good thing for the lab!*” ~

~~~~~

They found Houka in the biology labs, carefully observed some complex chemical process that was happening in a series of vials in a little glass chamber lit by blue light.

“You girls found me, I’m impressed,” He waved, not looking up from the screens, “What’s up?”

“Hey! I’m doing – er, what I thought it would be cool if – Y’know we could kinda make a couple posts showing what’s up today, what everyone does around here,” Mako babbled excitedly. She and Ryuko had just worked this all out on the walk over. “How about it?”

“I’m game,” Houka straightened up and pushed his glasses up, “Misaki filled me in on your little situation. But yeah, let me fill you in on what’s going on here, it’s pretty neat.”

Mako, entranced by the slow conveyor belt that brought capsules forth into the chamber and took them out once they were filled by the rest of the intricate machines, simply filmed the process occurring while making a little “ooooh” noise until Ryuko asked, “So, what is all this shi-er -stuff anyway?”

“You remember a couple weeks ago, how I kept coming over to collect DNA samples from all the endangered plants in your garden? Well, this is the project that was for, something the biology department’s all hands on deck for. In this room we’re preparing and storing away genetic samples from every endangered organism we can. In the future, if and when these species go extinct, we’ll have everything we need to bring them back.”

“So cloning, huh?”

“Far from a fine point on it but, er, yes.”

“Wow... Y’know, I didn’t think this all with animals and stuff was really your thing. That’s kinda Shiro’s thing more, right?”

Houka shrugged with an eager smile, “Oh, typically yeah. But I want to prove we can do it.”

“That’s the spirit!” Mako chirped, “So what next, huh? Can we see ‘em clone something?”

“Well... no. This is species number three hundred seventy-two out of ten-thousand and fifty for today. I’ll be here overseeing it ‘til dinner, at least.”

Mako’s face went slack “...Oh...”

“... Oh...” Ryuko said too.

“... Look, it’s science. Nobody said it was exciting all the time.”

~~~~~

Next, they made their way to the training ring. The human level one, that was, not the kamui stadium outside. This was still within the lab, but had been renovated to bring the comforting wooden décor of a traditional dojo to it.

“Bro!”

“Maaaaataroooo!” They called as soon as they spotted him over by the weapon rack, testing the flex on a new shipment of practice boken.

Mataro hurried up, “Yo! What’s up you guys! Heard you were here today!”

“Yu-huh! We’re filming what everyone’s up to around the place today, making a little series out of it!”

“On your GroupLink account?” Mataro asked skeptically. Mako shot him an angry “*you got a problem with that?*” look with puffed up.

“What’s wrong with GroupLink?” Ryuko asked, genuinely unsure.

“*Mataro* here thinks it’s *for girls*,” Mako said snidely.

“Yeah, and we’re girls. What’s the problem?”

“No – shutup Mako! It’s not that it’s just that, ah, y’know GroupLink’s kinda not as popular as it used to be,” Mataro held up his hands defensively, desperate not to give Ryuko the wrong impressions about his preference in social media. “It’ll go the way of facebook in a few years, you watch. I bet half the people who have accounts just use it to follow Mako!”

“Oh yeah? Well then I’m doing a good job by keeping it afloat!” Mako shot back resolutely. There might have been escalation in that little Mankanshoku family spat if not for Yuda coming along at this time. Like Mataro he’d been exercising all day, the final leg of their fitness training to ensure they would be strong enough to resist the initial strain of wearing a kamui, and he was shining with sweat with his hair hanging wet and limp. He straightened his back and gave a punctilious salute to Ryuko.

“Your majesty! Princess Mankanshoku!” He barked, and Ryuko remembered that tidbit someone had mentioned about him having previously served as the bodyguard for the Indonesian Royal family. Not that he’d done the job out of any loyalty – he was picked mostly on combat merits – but he knew the decorum.

Mako looked confused, “Huh? Oh! You’re the new guy! You’re... *Ryuko!*” She whispered urgently.

“Oh, right. Mako, this is Yuda Uwais. Uwais, uh, you already know who this is.”

“I’m honored to make your acquaintance, princess Mankanshoku,” He said formally, and Ryuko scrunched her face up.

“I thought Aikuro and Tsumugu told you a while ago to can it with the manners,” Ryuko said, “You’ll be seeing Mako around plenty, you’d better get used to her.”

“Put ‘er there!” Mako held out a hand for a shake, which turned into a quick surprise hug even despite Yuda’s perspiration. Mako was unphased by such things.

He sighed, “Right, right, what am I thinking? I guess I keep expecting one of you is going to act like the nobles I’m used to back home.”

“Well, if there was one it’d be Satsuki,” Ryuko smiled fondly.

“Really? I mean, she seems serious but otherwise she’s pretty okay with it.”

“Yeah, well, it was a growing experience for her getting that way back in the day. So, what’s up around here, you guys about to step into the ring?”

“Sure are,” Mataro said. “Today’s boken and quarterstaffs, spice things up.”

Then Mako was hit with an abrupt idea, “Wait, that’s it! Before you do, I should do lil’ profiles on you guys! The kamui corps newest recruits!”

It wasn’t a bad idea, nor difficult to execute, just a bit of cleaning up their hair, posing with some dashing looking armaments (Mataro his sword, Yuda his karambits), and a couple carefully spliced quotes and they were uploading. Mako was bubbling over, “Great! Oh, people’re already seeing the one with Houka, look!”

She showed Ryuko the comments. All positive, all wholesome. Ryuko was particularly struck by one that read *\*They talk like nothing about this is crazy at all. A giant cloning project must seem pretty unremarkable to them\**

“Huh. Well, thanks guys,” She gave the corpsmen-in-training a friendly wave, “We’ll let you get back to it!”

“Hold on a sec!” Mako protested, “I wanna film a bit of them fightin’! Who doesn’t love that?”

Everyone else froze.

“Um...”

“I don’t...”

“Gee, I don’t know how to tell you this Mako,” Mataro said, “But you run a family friendly account, right?”

“ ‘Course I do, why?”

“Well, it’s just when you practice for wearing a kamui you fight naked is all,” Mataro explained sheepishly, but that was nothing compared to the beet red Mako’s face turned.

“Izzat true, Ryuko?” She asked hesitantly, and Ryuko nodded.

“To become one with your kamui, it has to become like your skin. You have to reject seeing it as clothes at all. You taught me that, you know,” Ryuko explained as though it was the simplest thing in the world.

“O-oh. How silly of me,” Mako laughed awkwardly, “Welp, guess we’ll be going then! Seeya!”

~~~~~

“Heyyy Shiro!”

“No.”

“Wha- but we just got here!” Mako huffed indignantly as they stepped into Shiro’s darkened, office, casting a harsh light on his pale skin. The only light within the room came from a complex display, like a hologram but with screens around the edges too, portraying something in the rough shape of a huge creature stitched together from thousands of fibers and threads. Something very familiar looking to Ryuko. And next to it, a map of the human nervous system. Points on the two of them were linked by dotted lines, as though this great, draconic being could be lashed down within the frail confines of a human body.

Ryuko couldn’t tell whether Shiro was more angry or alarmed. His normally dour eyes were wide open, evidently surprised and scared Ryuko would put the pieces together. He blurted, “Well, you can’t stay. If the kamui chamber is top secret, then this is Mount Everest. Out. Now.”

“Alright, geez, you don’t gotta be an asshole about it,” Ryuko sniffed as she turned around and wheeled Mako out.

~ “Sorry about him!” ~ Izanami called after them as the door shut. ~ “He just gets cranky when we hit a setback!” ~

When the door was closed Mako wondered aloud, “Gosh, what do you suppose that was about?”

“Dunno,” Ryuko shrugged, though in truth she knew damn well. The human hybridization project. Shiro was still working on it. And evidently it wasn’t far from completion. By this point, he probably knew more about the process than her father ever had.

Ryuko shuddered involuntarily.

Pouting and scuffing her feet, Mako looked downcast, “Well, that one was a total bust. That’s not everyone who’s here today, is it?”

“Well, everyone who’s not up to their eyeballs in work and – oh, y’know who I bet’ll chill with us? Aikuro. He’s never busy!”

~~~~~

As it turned out, Ryuko figured hell must have frozen over or something because Aikuro was busy. They took the elevator up from the labs into his ground-floor conference room only to find every seat filled by serious looking men and women of a dozen different ethnicities. Ryuko’s keen nose picked up the fresh scent of hotel soap on all of them – these were officials from the other nations in the League. Not that Ryuko herself was needed to micromanage every little detail of her supposed kingdom, but she suddenly felt that she’d walked in on something she really ought to know more about.

“If it isn’t our royal ladies, looking lovely as ever!” Aikuro greeted them, seeing no need to follow any kind of decorum.

“Uh, hey,” Ryuko couldn’t banter with him with all those expectant eyes on her, all those hushed murmurs about her. They looked shocked, they probably didn’t even know that she could turn down the glow of her hair when she wasn’t using much of her power – most people seemed to



assume she shined like the sun at all times. *This is our queen?* They seemed to be asking. *This is the being who we overthrew our governments so we could join her? She's just a girl!*

Mako, however, was less phased. "Aww, we were sure you wouldn't be busy!" She exclaimed. "Ryuko you promised he wouldn't be doing anything!"

"Yeah, well, I'm not omniscient," She shrugged.

"And I *am* the president of this institution. Occasionally I have to do *something* about that," Aikuro said proudly. "Today we're seeing about exporting some of the renewable energy tech we've come up with over the last few years here out across the League."

"Oh, I see.."

"You're more than welcome to sit in if you'd like," Aikuro knew that while he was obligated to say that, there was no way they did.

Fortunately, Ryuko'd formulated her saving move, "Actually, can we talk in your office for just a sec?"

Once in Aikuro's office he signed and said, "I was honestly hoping you might show up, just to bitch to if nothing else."

"Huh? Why what's up?"

"Well, it's just that Rei promised them all the moon, that they'd be able to go carbon neutral or even positive within the next five years. And fair enough, that's the right thing to do and in theory we have the tech to do it. But then Nonon's also out there and every time the army gets to another country Nonon tells them to cut their taxes to zero. Which is also necessary because you can't tax people who've been bombed to hell by REVOCS and then Krakatoa on top of that, they just don't have any money left and what little they do needs to be used to rebuild. But then they come to us and *I've* got to be the bearer of bad news that they just can't afford it."

Ryuko thought she understood, "Oh shit. You coulda just asked for the money, y'know. Here, one sec," She reached into her pocket and whipped out her checkbook – she'd gotten used to carrying it around lately.

"Hold up Ryuko that's not the point. Your bank account isn't the treasury."

"Nah, nah it's chill. Let's see... *Kinue Kinagase Research Complex*," She mumbled as she wrote, "And then you just write the number here and spell it out on that line."

"Yeah, I'm aware of the concept of a blank check," Aikuro pushed Ryuko's checkbook away from him, "And the whole lab wouldn't exist without donations from your fortune, I know. But this is different. The idea of The League of The Pacific is that all the countries within it are still independent, the whole queen position is just for symbolism and military defense. You start handing stuff down like this and it undermines the whole thing. See the problem?"

"Well, sure I do, but they need this. And it's for the sake of the Earth. Way I see it we all need this. So just this once?"

Aikuro grumbled, but when Ryuko ripped the check out, he took it.

In retrospect it may have seemed obvious, but nobody could've predicted just how much the coronation would affect politics, would affect daily life, would affect the world. It began immediately, ten national revolutions in a single week, ten new titles for the "ceremonial" queen Ryuko, the establishment of the League of the Pacific. Okay, sounds bad, but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. After all, every piece of land from Hokkaido to Tasmania might belong to the savior Matoi, but it didn't belong to one *state*. It wasn't an empire.

This was just a military alliance, against REVOCS, and who wouldn't want to be protected by the great and powerful when those traitors to humanity came calling? And sure, it wasn't like the countries who joined were democracies, but monarchies with democratic institutions who would see their monarch for a single quick visit every week were close enough, wasn't it? And wasn't it a good thing for the remaining great powers, Russia, America, India, to think that maybe this wasn't a rising rival, one with unfathomable popular support and an army that couldn't be stopped by mortal means?

That state of affairs would degrade quite rapidly, and it began with seemingly harmless choices like that on Ryuko's part. Maybe her more educated friends should have warned her, but as Aikuro found out even when they tried it wasn't like she'd listen.

With that out of the way, Aikuro asked, "So, what can I do for you girls?" And they went ahead and explained what they'd been doing with the afternoon. Aikuro scratched his chin and said to Mako, "I see. Well, I do have to finish this meeting, but I can get everyone in there to pose for a picture. Will that help?"

"Oh, totally! People'll like to see all the good work you do!" Mako nodded.

"Alright then. Sorry, it does sound like fun, wish I could take a break but it's just not in the cards today."

"S cool. Sorry I said you didn't do any work. But, I mean, who else is around? We went to Houka and Shiro and Mataro, that's not it today, is it?" Ryuko asked.

"Hmm. Well – and I know this might seem obvious – but you've considered going to Satsuki, right?"

~~~~~

Ryuko had considered going to Satsuki. And the reason she'd decided against it was – she had to admit – fairly selfish. Leave Satsuki to do her work now and she'd be done sooner, and when they got home Ryuko would have her all to herself for longer. But screw it. She could share with Mako.

"Heyyy, Satsuki," She sang sweetly as she opened the door to Satsuki's office. Satsuki was touched that Ryuko was so tentative about bothering her, and her smile only broadened when she saw Mako following after her.

"Hello you two!" She beamed, "Why, this is an unexpected treat."

"Now, I know you're super busy and everything, but-,

"You wanna make a vlog with us?" Mako finished Ryuko's thought.

Satsuki wasn't so out-of-touch she could pretend she didn't know what that word meant, and it showed because her face colored up a little, "Oh. No, I don't know if that's a good idea." When they didn't look convinced but instead doggedly hurried up around her, pulling chairs across the desk to sit on either side of her, Satsuki protested, "I'm not familiar with this, the etiquette and all."

But Ryuko put an arm around her shoulder casual as could be and said, "You've been on TV so many times. This's nothing compared to that. We've been doing this all afternoon, trust me it's a cinch."

"Well, I – oh alright," Satsuki caved without much struggle. "So, what is this going to be anyway? Your, uh, GroupLink isn't it?"

"Hah! You're such a grandma when it comes to computers!" Mako giggled as she leaned forward to prop up her phone on the desk and start the recording.

"Well, I don't know, I've never been much for social media," Satsuki blurted defensively, "It's different from giving speeches because there's a level of formality that both the presenter and the audience are prepared for there, not this sort of candid, person-to-person thing with strangers. What? What are you smiling at Ryuko?"

"We started the recording," She said, and gave Satsuki's suddenly very rosy cheek a kiss. Satsuki let her and Mako have a good laugh at her expense.

"Oh dear. H-hello," Satsuki said shyly, fully aware that the moment Mako uploaded this the eyes of the world would be on her – not a carefully composed persona, her as she was.

She'd have to learn to look at that as a good thing.

~~~~~

It helped that she was with Ryuko and Mako. It was easy enough to pretend like they were just sitting and talking, taking a lunch break as she often did to chat with them. What did it matter if after the fact tens of millions would watch what they said? She wasn't going to clam up and ruin her fiancé's fun just because this would shape her public image in some unpredictable way. And after a while, she did manage to forget about it almost entirely.

Probably as a result of forgetting about it, Satsuki wasn't very good at keeping her eyes on the camera. One of the most popular comments on the video after it was posted would reflect this and read *\*wish I could find someone who looked at me the way Satsuki looks at Ryuko\**

"Okay, you guys wanna do some more questions?" Mako asked, using Ryuko's phone to scroll through a list of questions her fans had posted. When Ryuko answered that sure they did, Mako said, "Ooh, here's a cute one that's got lots of likes: 'What are you looking forward to most about being married?' "

"Ahh, if I had known it was gonna be more sappy stuff..." Ryuko grumbled

"The people want to know," Satsuki said, acting as though she was only doing it out of grudging acceptance. "Let's see now, I think-,"

"-The thing I'm most looking forward too is – oh shoot, sorry Sats, you go first."

“Thank you. The thing about it is, I’m not sure very much about our lives will change. We already live together. So, I think the thing I’m most excited about is that I’ll become Satsuki Matoi. I know, that’s not fair to my surviving relatives, but they know our name comes with some ugly connotations.”

“That’s so sweet,” Mako murmured, practically tearing up. “And what about you, Ryuko?”

“Honeymoon,” Ryuko answered with a smug look.

“Wha – Ryuko!” Mako exclaimed.

“You absolute boor,” Satsuki said.

“Yeah yeah, I’m a boar, whatever, but I’m right!”

“No, not a boar like the animal, Ryuko, the word is –,”

“Ooh! Here’s one that kinda ties into your answer Satsuki!” Mako jumped in, “It says: ‘Is there anything you miss about ruling Honnouji?’ “

Satsuki frowned, “Goodness no. Although…”

“Hmm?”

“I do sometimes wish I’d had more time to experiment with the power that Junketsu gave me. It was such a strain on the body I could only use it when I truly needed it, but I’ve always wondered what it would be like to have that power without the danger the way that Ryuko and Senketsu did. I’m not made of stone. And especially now that the whole kamui corps gets to experience it together, and it’s basically all any of them want to do. I would’ve liked to have more time to try flying, especially.

Mako gasped, “Ohmygod right? I’m so jealous, I only ever got to use my Goku Uniform like twice. And neither of those times was very fun. I just wanna know what it’s like, but Goku Uniforms are done with and kamui are so special you can’t just *try* wearing a kamui, so there’s nothin’ I can do!”

On hearing that, an idea suddenly occurred to Ryuko. *No wait, those aren’t the only two kinds of life-fiber clothes there are. I’m wearing a different kind. Clothes made from **me**.* And she decided to do what a scientific mind like Houka’s would in this situation and run a little experiment.

~~~~~

“Wait, so your bra isn’t part of it?” Mako asked as though incapable of believing what she was seeing as Ryuko shed her royal vestments and handed them over.

“No, never was with Senketsu either.”

“So where’d it go when you transformed?”

“He put it in another dimension, I guess,” Ryuko shrugged.

“That’s stupid,” Mako frowned, flipping the red and gold outfit around in her hands, trying grasp what she was being told. This was part of Ryuko she was holding?

“Well it’s the truth. Don’t worry about the size, just put it on. It’ll change to fit ya.”

“Ryuko, are you sure about this?” Satsuki called from many yards away on the edge of the stadium. “It’s never been tested before!”

“Yeah, we’re testing it now! Mako’s supposed to be really compatible, so I bet it works perfectly. Besides, I’m not gonna hurt *Mako!*” She called back more confidently than she felt. She wasn’t sure if it was even possible, and the idea of being on the other side of the human – kamui interaction was a chilling unknown. What would it feel like?

“Ookay,” Mako took a deep breath, unsure whether to feel excited or terrified. It took her a moment to even figure out how all the layers fit together, but as she slipped them on each piece felt more and more natural, tighter and more form fitting. “Is it gonna need blood or anything?”

“No, I don’t think I do but –,” abruptly Ryuko caught herself as something shifted inside her. A tiny little pulsing foreign presence, somewhere between a heart palpitation, a rumble in her stomach, and a baby kicking (a sensation which, thanks to Ragyo’s memories, she had some familiarity with). Only not within her flesh and blood body but *out there*, in the expanse of her full being which usually was imperceptible to her when she was bound to a human form. She froze up, “Ohh *shit* that’s weird.”

“What’s weird?” Mako asked, and she finished putting on Ryuko’s jacket the whole thing clicked into place. She was bound to Mako now. Was it possible to make her feel it too? Picturing her vast from extending a tendril to brush against the foreign presence, Ryuko was rewarding by a feeling of a tiny membranous barrier between them dropping and –

“**WHAAAAAAAAHAHAHAHAHA**!” Mako shouted as wind and light *blasted* from her body, every line and detail on Ryuko’s royal vestments ablaze with flaming red-orange light that made her skin glow and shimmer. The sheer force of the rushing air from her blaster Ryuko and Satsuki’s hair back and dropped the air pressure like a huge storm was brewing.

“Oh *my*,” Satsuki murmured in astonishment, only audible to herself.

And Ryuko could *feel* Mako there. Her heart pounded so loud and fast it felt like it was creeping up her throat, and this terrible pressure of roller-coaster adrenaline – terror and thrill – pumped through her head. She had her eyes closed, but in the moment that she opened them Ryuko could *see herself*, standing there half naked save for her crown which hovered doggedly around her whipping hair.

“Mako?” She shouted, “Are you okay?”

Okay? What a stupid question. She could feel Mako’s response. No, she wasn’t okay, she was doing... awful? Amazing? Finally, she managed to stammer through gritted teeth, “M-m-maybe j-just a lllliittle l-less!”

“Huh? Oh!” Ryuko managed to figure out how to retract her presence from Mako, just a little bit. Just enough that the intense sense of Mako’s heartbeat drifted from her awareness and the wind racing from her died down to a gentle, cool breeze. Mako propped her hands up on her knees, huffing from the exertion, but she kept her feet.

Of course she did, she wasn't scared at all anymore. After the first moment when a tidal wave of raw energy overcame her, she became so intensely aware of the way Ryuko's presence permeated her. Like a warm, fuzzy, electrifying blanket. And now as she felt Ryuko dial down that heart racing, overwhelmingly powerful sensation there was nothing but absolute trust in her. Ryuko was guiding her through this, and that meant it was going to be okay.

"Can you... can you move?" Ryuko asked hesitantly.

It was like she was battling a tide of Ryuko's own doting fear that numbed and clotted her head, but Mako managed to straighten up. She tensed her hands into fists. Could she move? She had to. Every muscle cramped with stored energy like a spring. For just the briefest second Mako felt a crystal of absolute clarity like she never had before. She was borrowing a tiny bit of Ryuko's power and it was so much more than her Goku uniform ever had.

And then she jumped so high she practically vanished into a dot against the sky. Ryuko watched her ascent, laughing with joy they could both feel. "Ohhhhhh ho-holy shit. Sats turn on the life-fiber jamming field!"

Satsuki hurried over and did just that, and by the time Mako landed she was separated from them by that red-tinted bubble shield.

"RYUKO!" Mako shouted as she crashed down to the earth and blasted into Ryuko, arms spread wide as she flew in an instant, enfolding Ryuko in such a swift bear hug that even she was caught off guard and they went skidding along the ground until they hit the other side of the stadium.

Ryuko, none the worse for the wear, grinned up at Mako and said, "Well, how is it?"

"It's – It's so – I mean I don't even know how to – **The best**," Mako concluded her babbling as she bounded off Ryuko, patting herself as though she couldn't believe she'd done that. "I'm not dreaming am I?"

"Give it a try," Ryuko said, and there wasn't anything more to say, really. Mako tore off, screaming at the top of her lungs as she sprinted in a wide circle around the stadium at top speed, reduced to a blur in Satsuki's eyes until she lost her footing and went spinning off through the air, only to bounce completely unharmed off the life-fiber jammer and get right back up.

"Amazing," Ryuko breathed, "It worked!" Already she had big plans. She doubted given her time with Junketsu that Satsuki would ever be ready for a kamui of her own, but this, an outfit made from Ryuko's life-fibers just for her, that could work. It would be the perfect way to make sure she was always safe, and give her a taste of this joy.

When Mako finally – and it was finally – got tired of just running and leaping around at superhuman speeds she skidded to a halt in front of Ryuko. "Okay! That was great, let's fight now!"

"You wanna fight? Me?"

"Course! I wanna try kamui fighting too, wouldn't you? C'mon Ryuko I'm dying to see what all the fuss is about!"

"Geez... Mako I can't fight you!"

“Why? Oh, is it cuz I’m wearing part of you? Well let’s see!” Mako’s brain and body were both going a mile a minute, and she barely gave what Ryuko said – or the feeling of hesitancy radiating from her - a second thought before leaping right for her face, fist outstretched. Ryuko dodged easily, of course she could feel it coming, and when Mako pivoted around a threw in another flurry of punches Ryuko dodged just as easily. To an ordinary human it would’ve looked like a graceful dance, but on closer inspection it was merely Mako stumbling past Ryuko, mighty punches uncoordinated and leaving her completely off balance. Every time Ryuko saw a dozen openings ripe for exploitation, completely unguarded angles for knees and elbows to her gut. But there was just no way she’d go for any of them.

Eventually she got complacent and allowed Mako to land a punch on her. It was a fearsome blow, her light little human body was indeed sent flying, but at the apex of her flight Ryuko engaged her ability to levitate, halting and righting herself in midair before she dropped to the ground.

“See? You’ve got no problem hitting yourself!” Mako asserted, feeling unreasonably proud of her success in landing a hit on Ryuko. She knew Ryuko let her do it, but even still in her eyes Ryuko was like superman, ever victorious and utterly unassailable. To even get close to her, to be given the privilege of sparring with her even if it was condescension – if Mako didn’t spend all her time around people for whom martial arts was a way of life she would never have known it was something she wanted. But she did want it, and Ryuko knew it.

“No, it’s not that. Mako, I can’t hit *you*,” Ryuko said, “Never could. Never wanted to.”

“Oh. You’re not kidding,” Mako said softly.

“No I’m not,” Ryuko walked up to Mako. “I know it’d just be for fun, but I don’t think I could bring myself to do it even though I know you’ll be alright. Sorry, we’ll find someone else,” She went to hug Mako, but in the moment she did Mako giggled and gave her a playful shove that sent them both skidding on their feet until they were tens of yards apart. “You don’t really think you can provoke me like that, do ya?”

“Nah, but when we were kids Mataro and I had some pretty rough and tumble yard games. I can’t provoke you that way, but I know how I might,” She sing-songed.

“Oh yeah? And would that be?”

“Keep away!” Mako shouted, tearing off away from Ryuko at top speed with no warning, “You want your clothes back you’ll have to chase me!”

Ryuko briefly considered that she could just decrease the amount of power Mako had access to, but where was the fun in that. Faster than even Mako could perceive she caught up to her, gingerly grabbing her by the collar and lifting her flailing body up like a kitten. “Easy.”

But Mako wasn’t done. “Hiya!” She shouted as she whipped around and hit Ryuko in the gut with a knee. It didn’t hurt any and Ryuko’s solar plexus was far tougher than that, but it did send her body flying and suddenly Mako was free and running, laughing giddily at her clever little trick.

“Oh, you little sneak, now it’s on!” Ryuko sprang to her feet with a grin. This might do just fine, even if she could never see herself hitting Mako grabbing was another story clearly. And

they'd found a way to keep the fun going until Mako was out of energy. And Mako had a lot of energy.

~~~~~

It was early evening when Aikuro came out, stretching a back sore from a day spent in an office chair, and plopped down next to Satsuki in the bleachers of the kamui stadium. She'd gotten her laptop and had long since finished her work, and was just watching the nearly incomprehensibly fast flashes of light and blasts of noise and dust that roared around the battlefield in front of her.

"When Shiro mentioned what they were up to, I had to see it in person," he said. "Looks like she eventually did get Ryuko to throw a punch, huh?" He said, moments before the two combatants froze for a perfect moment as their fists collided and a sonic boom clapped off the bleachers.

"Oh, hours ago. Despite her many protests. Mako did say that she'd never failed to goad Mataro with this technique."

"You don't say. And is this supposed to make good GroupLink vlog material?"

Satsuki chuckled, "Hmm, you're asking the wrong woman, I can assure you I have no idea. There's cameras all around the stadium though, if she wants to borrow the footage –,"

"Yeah, of course she can. All ends up on the Research Complex's website anyway. Kamui fights is our most popular page. Well, second most popular next to the one with the livestream of the endangered sea otter breeding colony."

"You have one of those? It's more popular than kamui?" Satsuki asked, amazed.

"If you're surprised it's just because you haven't seen the little devils," Aikuro laughed, "I tell ya though, the complex wouldn't be half of what it is without you – and her now too," He motioned towards Ryuko. "She was a lifesaver today with that blank check stunt, I gotta be honest."

"Mmm, I heard."

"Oh, she told you?"

"No, actually Rei called. Not too happy. Something about a slow slide into empire and good intentions paving certain roads," Satsuki rolled her eyes. "A bit dramatic, but she's absolutely correct and I told her as much. Centralizing power under the banner of the monarchy is the exact opposite of the idea, but Ryuko doesn't always know when she's doing it or not."

"That's what I said too, but she insisted," Aikuro sighed, "So... we refund it?"

"You really want to? We have to let it slide this time. But I'll talk to her about it, you have my word." Another sonic boom as a giant midair axehandle punch from Mako sent Ryuko slamming into the ground and cracked the concrete of the stadium floor (it was repaved on a weekly basis anyway, someone was always doing this). Ryuko barely took an instant to recover before she was zooming through the air again. "Just not right now."



“Hmm, yeah probably not. Doesn’t look like you’re gonna get your turn today, does it?” Aikuro asked.

“Oh, I’m not worried. I’m patient enough. And besides,” She smiled, “Look how much fun they’re having. I think we have to admit that Mako’s got it in her to be one of us too. And not in the ‘member of the family’ sense. You know what I mean.”

“You think *I* need convincing of that? Hahahaha!” Aikuro laughed sharply, “You never tried teaching her.”

## Chapter End Notes

I really like this one. Just vibin' with the crew.

# Across the Border

## Chapter Notes

UPDATE: probably a few more days on another chapter. What can I say? I work at a college, it's busy come the end of the fall semester.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

December 2067

~~~~~

Most of the time, unless the kamui had a major disagreement with their human they were more than happy to let them speak for them both. They knew that, with great effort, Senketsu had managed to communicate to humans other than Ryuko, but the truth was there was rarely a situation worth trying. Talking amongst themselves was a fine second option, if there was some reason their humans couldn't. Saiban and Sejitsu talked all night while Uzu and Nonon slept, and of course Izanami and Misaki were in constant electronic contact. But their humans were leaders in a war effort, some days their attention was pulled in a million different directions and it felt only natural for the kamui do the talking instead.

On one of those days, Nonon and Rei found themselves zooming back and forth over the city of Dandong, getting everything as ready as they could for Ryuko's arrival. In most respect this was pretty routine, Ryuko tried to visit a few of the constituent countries in the League every week, doing what was only right and trying to learn about the places she ostensibly ruled. The only difference being this city lay on the border between what was once North Korea and what was nominally still China – it wasn't part of the League. And yet there they were, on the wrong side of the river, hanging up League banners and dodging thronging crowds and setting each of their generals and local ministers in place and carefully curating the long list of petitioners for the Queen and trying to get *someone* to put out all those out of control bonfires the mobs in the housing projects kept setting. Too much to do, but none of it battle, so Saiban and Furashada were just along for the ride.

*[Hey, does it ever feel strange to you that we call our enemies life-fibers?]* Saiban asked. The two women were blocks apart dealing with entirely different issues, but he didn't need to shout even over the crowds.

*[No, not really]* Furashada replied mildly, intrigued at the idea that it might to Saiban.

*[Well it's just that **we're** life-fibers too, aren't we? And yet we're not part of them, the network, the "hivemind", however you want to say it.]*

*[Life-fibers combined with human DNA. We aren't the same form of life as them, they're life-fibers and we're kamui. And Ryuko's a hybrid. We're just different types of beings that are all made of life-fibers and... well, okay I see the problem]* Furashada said.

*[Right? It's like if you called animals 'cells', but just animals, even though all the rest of Earth life is also made of cells,] Saiban said enthusiastically.*

*[So, we need a new name, don't we?] Furashada said thoughtfully. Saiban didn't know if he was like this innately, or if Rei's intelligence had imprinted on him, but this was the sort of cerebral question he enjoyed. Nonon and Saiban had seen them doing sudoku and crosswords such even when she seemed completely distracted, and Saiban had to explain to Nonon that in fact it was Furashada who was doing them. [Hmm. Well, 'The Network' seems simple and apt, doesn't it? Ryuko's used that before too. It's a bit generic though, we can improve on it. Better than 'Hivemind' though, because for one thing that's in a lot of movies, and for another it implies that it has a single operating sentience. That doesn't seem right to me.]*

*[I don't think, even if it does have one mind, that it sees it that way. If it even is that different from us.]*

*[What's that supposed to mean?]*

*Saiban hesitated, but then explained, [It wasn't always like this. Or, at least, that's what Rosuketsu showed me.]*

*[Oh yeah, you mentioned that] Furashada said. All the kamui had some degree of fascination with that incident, in fact Furashada was almost jealous. The distant space where the stars swam, that other side which only Ryuko had access to, it exuded a terrifying mystery to them. Especially considering that Senketsu was still alive there, a name which carried a degree of reverence for them. Any glimpse of it was tantalizing, on top of the glory of facing down Rosuketsu. Their humans would say let Ryuko venture there alone, nothing good would come of it. But Saiban had seen it! [I guess I wouldn't have expected the life-fiber network to have existed since the dawn of time] Furashada said, encouraging Saiban to say more.*

*[No, it didn't but – do you know that feeling you get when you transform? Like there's more to you than just this body?] Saiban asked.*

*[‘Course.]*

*[That's what it felt like, back in the oldest vision Rosuketsu showed me. There was this whole narrative, you see, it wanted to make me understand that 'The Network' was a good thing. Before that point, there were free beings made of life-fibers **felt** not too different from you or I or Ryuko. No humanity, but like us on some level. They orbited around planets and seemed to... feed off some kind of energy from the life on them. And they looked like... well, they looked like-]*

*[- Like what?]*

*[Like its hard to even describe. Like crystals but woven out of life-fibers and alive and too complex, glowing all kinds of colors and constantly shifting, and all this movement on all these levels like a city, it's just... you know what it's like? They looked the way aura **feels**.]*

*[Wow... So, then what happened?]*

*[Well, it showed me these things fighting each other, said it was because they were using that energy to make their own internal universes, so they didn't need each other anymore. Which, no, I have no idea what that means. But it was like watching animals eat each other. Primitive*

*ones. No remorse, no negotiating, no alliances. And then it showed me the present day. And today there's only one.]*

*[So, one of them eventually won out and ate all the others!]* Furashada shuddered just imagining it. A huge, bestial predator whose very body stretched across the galaxy, unparalleled in its sophistication, uncaring in its appetites.

*[Well I don't know. Because Rosuketsu said that there was some other thing, some other sort of being that came along and unified them. Called them the 'most generous ones'. And I believe it that some of that is true, because when it showed me the present, I had this distinct feeling. Like I was... being watched.]*

Something about that phrase pricked in Furashada's mind, it was so chillingly euphemistic. *[So another kind of life-fiber being?]*

*[It didn't say. But something about the fact that I couldn't detect these things except from that feeling makes me think perhaps not. But then, what reason do I really have to believe any of that? Why wouldn't it lie?]*

*[And even if it didn't, so many unanswered questions. What is this energy they get from organic life? Because it certainly isn't raw energy? What does making internal universes mean? And what is this thing that supposedly united them?]*

*[I have no idea]* Saiban would've shrugged if he was able, as it was he was engaged in his flight mode as Nonon hovered in front of a group of local ministers, coaching them on how to talk to Ryuko and, more importantly, to Satsuki. *[It honestly doesn't bother me as much as you'd think. They're the enemy, I don't want to go back to the other side anytime soon Earth's much better. The answers will come in due time.]*

*[So, you never asked Mother about it, then? She's the only one who could have answers.]*

*[Ryuko? Nah, never really found a suitable time. Plus, we read the report Houka and Shiro did on it, and that's got everything she told them. It wasn't **super** helpful – well, I'm sure you read it too.]* Saiban said, but in truth that was him being evasive. It was something else Rosuketsu had said. That Ryuko was a hanger on from those ancient days, manipulating Earth for its own survival. Rationally, Saiban knew that was either a lie or Rosuketsu was mistaken. But the idea of asking her about it still made him – and Nonon – feel uncomfortable somehow. What if that wasn't the case? They were just beginning to repair their relationship with Ryuko, they weren't ready to risk the chance she harbored another even darker secret.

But Furashada was just as much of an insister, a needler as Rei was (at least with people they were comfortable with). He said *[But its been months, and you haven't found a time? I think this is the exact kind of thing we need to pool knowledge together on. Who knows, it might even turn out to be strategically important.]*

*[Okay, well sure, but-]*

*[You really don't want to know? If it weren't for... uh, well, **reason s**, I would do it myself.]*

Preparations were nearly complete. Finally, Nonon and Rei meet on a high rooftop. They'd done the best they could, but there was no way to clean up this town. It was a dull, drab city full of dull-drab high rises and the bitterly cold winter only made that worse. The humans got chills as they

looked out over the huge mural the citizens had painted on one of the sheer concrete surfaces of a high-rise. Ryuko, cradling the Earth in her hands, a great rainbow lighting shining down from a huge eye above her. Shinra Koketsu, the nearest thing a human had ever seen to the true face of their enemy. And the words read, “Our lady protects”.

*[Come on, let's ask her together why don't we?]* Furashada suggested.

At this point Rei took over the conversation, saying, “We might as well. Not like either of them will be happy with progress here, and not like they need to be either after all *we aren't supposed to be here anyway.*”

Nonon shrugged. Sure, technically taking over a Chinese city was basically an act of war, but their government basically went down with the ship when REVOCS obliterated their military so it wasn't clear if there was anyone to go to war with. But the war with REVOCS knew no borders, and on the city outskirts there still stood the empty skeleton of an obelisk (they were hard to knock down without causing catastrophic collateral damage). So here they were. “The book burning is what really gets me. I guess it's supposed to be a show of loyalty, burning holy texts, but why do they need such big fires?”

“They'd be burning nonbelievers too if we let them,” Rei commented darkly. Leaving Japan, seeing what the rest of the world had become, was eye opening to say the least. Matouists in Japan were mostly peaceful people, but on the mainland living under the terror of REVOCS had turned them into fanatics. Only the kamui could save them, only Ryuko was a real god, who would answer their prayers. Worship of false gods was intolerable. And where Nonon saw an ugly necessity, one that could be mitigated but not stopped, Rei saw something she hoped she never would again.

Without Ryuko in her life, all Rei had left was salvaging what could be salvaged from REVOCS' trail of destruction. Trying to make it into the just, peaceful, equal society that Satsuki had promised she'd build. And that would've been enough, it was a stimulating and at times fulfilling task. But more and more it felt like the whole thing was turning to shit. City after city and it was the same blind worship, the same squabbling over what little food was left, the same burning rage that said all anyone young and able bodied wanted to do was avenge themselves on REVOCS, on their former rulers, on anyone Ryuko said needed to go. Nonon didn't understand the threat, and Rei didn't blame her. Only Aikuro and Tsumugu really did, the rest had minds trained in the military necessities they'd learned at Honnouji.

Nonon thought for a second. On their own she and Saiban would never have bothered asking. But Furashada had a point, this was the kind of information that might turn out to be important. And it was rare enough for Rei to actually want to talk to Ryuko – and about something other than their relationship too. “Yeah, let's scrap the briefing. Honestly the less we tell Ryuko the less she can try and fix things and fuck it all up.”

“Like she did in the Philippines,” Rei nodded, chuckling.

“Nah, nah that time it turned out she was on the money. Paying off those pirates to turn them into guards might have seemed like a good idea at the time, but what kind of message does that send? With their ships at the bottom of the ocean they're just regular citizens,” Nonon said, “Satsuki's gonna want some more detail though, we'll still brief her.”

“She'd better.”

“Hey, you’ll be chill with her, right?” Nonon said, side eyeing Rei.

“When am I ever not chill? Honestly, she’s the one who insists on being cold all the time.”

~~~~~

Ryuko arrived in her preferred method: crashing from high atmosphere to Earth like red lightning, only to instantly come to a dead stop seemingly in defiance of physics. As the burst of air rocketed across the stage, the crowds, the rows of Reconquest flags, she hovered just above the ground with an innocent, bright smile on her face. The crowds went wild, obviously.

*Poor thing, she’s drunk off their adoration,* Rei thought as she watched, heart soft. She deserved to be celebrated like this, there had to be some way to do it that didn’t involve flogging nonbelievers in the street. She wouldn’t be smiling once the tour began. *What a cruel charade this is, forcing her to shoulder this responsibility she has no training for, never wanted.*

And then a helicopter descended behind her, and Satsuki emerged from it. There *she* was, utterly unashamed, so naturally at home in her role as Royal Consort. *Acting like she doesn’t even notice me! I just know she’ll take one look at my plan to fix up Dandong and say she’s already got one that’s better. And it **will** be better! And she’ll look at me with those smug, inscrutable fucking eyes and not even smile when I admit it!*

At least she looked troubled. To Rei’s eyes Ryuko was just happy to pass through the crowd, let their adoring hands brush her, and believe that all this would end in these people’s grim lives turning around. Satsuki knew what was actually involved in that. She knew it wasn’t so easy. And therein lay the most frustrating truth, that in spite all of that Rei was almost glad to see her. For all her flaws Satsuki was on Rei’s side, and she’d work herself to death doing everything in her power to save these poor people.

~~~~~

Touring cities tended to be a fairly procedural affair. See whatever was left of the downtown, the industry, the government offices, any local landmarks, and then onto specific issues. Assets seized always came first. Some private mansion or other was always disgorging precious antiques, or a horrific sex dungeon, or a life-fiber combat suit given by REVOCS in exchange for their support during Ragyo’s era. Today the haul was heroin, an entire warehouse worth.

“Holy...” Ryuko trailed off as she came to a stop before the solid pyramid of white bricks, shiny in their plastic wrap.

“I know,” Nonon said, “This all came right off the streets too. Gangs who were selling it practically tripped over themselves turning it all in.”

“Yeah, and now they’ve become those roving bands you see out there with the Matoist armbands on,” Rei explained dispassionately.

“Geez,” Ryuko murmured, thinking back on the six months she spent wandering the streets with nothing but her sword to her name, “Nope. Burn it. I’ve seen up close what this shit does.”

Nonon nodded with a smile, “Gladly.”

“Wha – but - Ryuko we can’t just do that! You have no idea what turning thousands of addicts loose with no rehab support will do to them! We’re making a rehab program but for the ones with the worst withdrawal symptoms there are no qualified doctors here, so we have to keep a little around in case of freakouts and near-death incidents.” Rei protested. “I know it sounds wrong, but we can’t just completely uproot society with no plan for what comes next, and this is part of the plan.”

To Rei’s shock, Ryuko turned to her not defensive, or angry at being countermanded, but with a deeply sad look in her eyes. It pierced right through her. She didn’t know that Ryuko saw her through Ragyo’s eyes too now, knew better even than she did the sheer evil of the indoctrination she’d been put through. It still made her take a step back and she thought to Furashada, *What am I doing? She’s right, this all **needs** to be destroyed! This stupid job, I want to be able to do the right thing and be idealistic like her, but then in comes the real world.* She glanced over at Satsuki, at once daring her to even try and intervene and also almost hoping she had an answer. But she just stared up at the heroin with a hand on her chin, lost in uneasy thought.

“If that’s what you want,” Ryuko shrugged, then turned to go, asking, “Alright, where too next?”

*[It’s not just me, something in the dynamic changed since we last saw Ryuko and Satsuki]*  
Furashada thought to Rei. *[That look..]*

*I know... Maybe going to the other side really has changed her somehow.*

~~~~~

The location for Ryuko’s briefing turned out to be a small, hastily refurbished shrine high in the hills to the west of the city, overlooking it and the obelisk’s husk. From this distance, the smoke from the fires didn’t look so bad.

And Ryuko said so, “Y’know, from this distance the smoke from the fires doesn’t look so bad. I bet you guys will talk some sense into this city in a few days.” She stopped leaning from the balcony and went inside, sitting at the largest of four chairs arranged in a semicircle. “So, who’s the first new pal I’m meeting today?” She asked sarcastically as the rest of them sat.

“Actually, we had something else in mind,” Nonon said, “Saiban?”

*[We – Furashada and I – want you to tell us about the other side. The Spirit World, Multidimensional Space, whatever you want to call it.]*

Ryuko was surprised, “Seriously? I mean, I get why you’d be curious, but I think I’ve told everyone what it’s like to go there by now. Y’know, the whole 3d space made of other 3d spaces thing? Asides from that everything’s in the report.”

“I’m sorry, what’s going on?” Satsuki asked politely. Nonon mouthed “*Kamui talking*” to her and she nodded, understanding.

*[No, not just about it in general.]* Furashada said, *[We want to know about the things that live there.]*

That wouldn’t do. Ryuko had concluded it was best not to tell anyone more than they needed to know. Not about what her real body was like, not about what she saw in Ragyo’s

memories, and definitely nothing about the life-fiber network or The Thing Behind The Veil. The humans would die and return to the Earth, never needing to know just what was waiting for them out there. And the kamui, like Senketsu, would probably one day have their physical bodies destroyed and join her and Senketsu in the real fight that would come next. But that day was a long time away, let them enjoy a human lifespan free of that knowledge. She looked apologetic as she said, “There’s really nothing more to tell. I only ever interact with Senketsu there, really. Just don’t worry about it, I’m sure our scientist friends will be able to research it at some point.”

*[Ryuko, **please**] Saiban said insistently, [I’ve let it go for far too long, but when we fought with Rosuketsu it showed me something. Or tried to, anyway. And now I have to wonder about it, and you’re the only one who might have answer.]*

“Wait wait wait wait,” Ryuko held up a hand, “It did *what*? Why didn’t you tell me sooner? This is – this is serious. Well what did it – hold on. The rest of you have to go out for a sec, sorry.”

Satsuki did so without protest, commenting that she didn’t get much from half a conversation anyway. But Furashada *[Aw, c’mon! This was my idea anyway!]*

“I’m sorry Furashada, but you aren’t ready. Honestly, you should consider it a mercy. It’s the least I can do for you.”

*[Sure, but...]* I was really hoping I’d get a chance to talk to you. Furashada though sadly for Rei’s benefit. A pang of guilt hit Rei, but it wasn’t gonna stop her from leaving.

*Come on. Maybe someday, but not right now.* She said as she slid the door shut behind her.

Now that it was just him and Nonon there with Ryuko, his mood was a little more apprehensive. Was he really about to come right out and ask her if she was what Rosuketsu thought she was, an ancient being only pretending to be human? What would she do if it was somehow true?

And Ryuko felt this and to lighten the mood quipped to Nonon, “To be clear, I’d have sent you out too if I didn’t think Saiban would just tell you everything anyway. And also, it’s damn cold out there for a girl to be without her kamui.”

“It’s the small courtesies, really,” Nonon said sarcastically.

“Now, let’s put our heads together and figure this out. But first, the most important thing. I know what happens to people when they die.”

In retrospect, sending Rei away might have been a mistake. If she could have been there while Ryuko and Saiban put the pieces together, that Rosuketsu’s “most generous ones” were Ryuko’s Thing Behind The Veil, that it hadn’t brought peace to the life-fibers but had enslaved them, that it used them to harvest not raw energy but the very consciousnesses and memories of organic life-forms to feed its impossible, grand horribleness, if she could have seen how Ryuko laid it all out despite Saiban and Nonon’s bemusement and shock she would have known that Ryuko had indeed changed. This was a more mature, less naïve Ryuko than the one she’d fallen in love with. If she could have seen that then, maybe it would have prevented a lot of what happened next.

~~~~~



*Oh geez.*

*Oh geez*, Rei and Satsuki thought at almost the same moment. They were alone on the stone balcony together, only them and the chilling winter breeze and the bare grey branches of the forest. Satsuki didn't seem to be greatly affected by the cold, and nor should she with the thick navy-blue wool coat she was wearing, but Rei with Furashada's warmth didn't feel it at all.

This was the first time they had been alone since Rei had found out about her and Ryuko. And Rei would have considered herself stupid if she did anything other than studiously hope it ended as fast as possible. She went over to the other end of the balcony and stared out over the city.

*When was the last time we were alone together?* She and Furashada wondered. *It would have to have been not too long after you awoke, doing some work in the office or something. Was she already involved with Ryuko then? She has to have been. And how long before that?*

They stood in silence for several minutes. What were they going to say to each other? But eventually Rei couldn't help it and started sneaking furtive peeks at Satsuki. Just to see what she was doing. *Feel fucking sorry, dammit!* She thought as though she could beam it into her head. And eventually she realized that Satsuki was sneaking furtive peeks at her. What she was thinking, Rei couldn't hope to guess.

She simply refused to be the one to crack. And eventually she wasn't. Satsuki, in a very slow and deliberate motion, lifted her hand and pointed to the mural of Ryuko and said, "I dislike that."

Instantly, Rei felt the blood pound angrily in her face. Did she think she was being funny? What a coy, stupid remark! "What do you expect me to do about it?" She spat.

Satsuki shrugged. Outwardly still calm, inwardly reeling at that furious rebuke. *Stupid Satsuki, what did you expect?*

"I suppose you already know what *you're* going to do about it," Rei said.

"I'm... sorry?"

"Here." Rei had been carrying a folder around under her arm all morning and now she stormed over and thrust it at Satsuki. "It's my plan for economic and cultural recovery in Dandong and the surrounding rural sector. Go ahead, tell me you've already got a better one."

"Well, I hate to disappoint you," Satsuki, frustrated and now regretting starting this whole exchange, said through gritted teeth. "But I don't."

"You don't? Really?" Rei was surprised to find herself a bit dismayed. Satsuki's work ethic had slipped? "Why not?" She demanded.

Satsuki looked at her piercingly and sighed as she said, "It isn't working. I'm seeing now that our standard procedure for reconquering new territory doesn't lead to recovery, and in more than a few cases my specific edicts haven't done so either."

"Oh what, this is harder than it looks? I could've told you that! 'Standard procedure' is just permanent military rationing, what the hell did you expect? You've got to offer a little more

than that to get these zealots who want nothing more than to go crusading for Ryuko to settle down and be productive citizens. Now look, my public housing plan-,”

Satsuki gave up trying to make a reconciliation then, gave up resisting that petty, irrational jealousy she still harbored. Why the hell was Rei yelling at her about a public housing plan? They both knew what this was really about. “Hah, public housing? These people lived in the People’s Republic of China; what do you think they think when they hear the words ‘public housing’?” She said with a scornful laugh.

“It’s more than that!” Rei protested, “The rehab program, for one thing!”

“Oh, right the rehab program, do tell me about that.”

~~~~~

“So that means that my brother...” Nonon trailed off.

“If he died wearing a uniform made from part of the life-fiber network, it took him. I’m sorry,” Ryuko nodded somberly.

“I – fuck. So many other people too,” Her eyes went glassy. Hundreds at least that she’d sent to The Thing Behind The Veil.

*[Why didn’t you tell us this? We should’ve known!]* Saiban demanded, more shocked than angry but, honestly, also a little angry.

“I... wanted to. But would you have done what you needed to do if you knew?” Ryuko said, and though they didn’t want to Nonon and Saiban saw her point. “It’s just a drop in the ocean compared to what they’ve already taken. What they will take if we let them. I have to believe we’ll be able to stop it for good.”

“Or else why did we ever try,” Nonon nodded. “Fuck, that means your dad too.”

“Yeah. There’s no getting him back.”

At this point in their conversation they heard Rei and Satsuki becoming quite animated outside.

“Uh oh. That doesn’t sound good,” Nonon said, “Do you think we should, uh, defuse the situation.”

Ryuko was at a loss, “How? Maybe they just need to have this confrontation, I don’t know. Let’s keep going with this, we can’t stop now.”

~~~~~

“Look, the thing you need to understand is calling it ‘Communist China’ is a joke. These people lived under just as much of a rigid hierarchy as anywhere else, and the drugs are part of it. They give the working class just enough money that they can spend it buying back what they need to survive, and anyone who decides not to play that unwinnable game becomes either a drug addict or a drug dealer. The addicts pay into the dealers who kick up to their bosses, and what do those bosses do? They buy fancy cars and rings and the smart ones spend half again as much money as they keep laundering the money and getting lawyers to try and claw their way out of the working

class. And soon enough all that cash is recycled back into the hands of the ruling class. You want to overthrow that whole system? Okay, but it *can't* happen in one day! And Ryuko coming in and making uniformed, off the cuff decisions is only making it harder!”

“Oh, well thank you for the lesson, but I already *knew* that,” Satsuki huffed. “I will review your proposed plan, I’ll give you that much, but don’t presume to tell me or Ryuko what to do.”

“Then tell her what to do! She doesn’t know any better!”

That was one too far for Satsuki. She scowled. “Take that back.”

“What?”

“You have no idea how hard she’s trying to be worthy of the situation she’s been thrust into.”

“Well that’s great, but *trying* doesn’t count for much,” Rei said. *Oh, sure she’ll try for Satsuki’s sake, but all the times I tried to get her to step up and be more active I always got a fight.* “And what is it, if I may ask, that you’ve been doing while she’s been trying?”

“Working on my dissertation,” Satsuki said, as though that needed no further explanation. When Rei’s eyes went wide, Satsuki said, “Yes, I do have other matters in my life besides the Reconquest.”

“You’re not supposed to!” Rei blurted. “What makes you think you can just take a break while the rest of the world is still here suffering!”

Satsuki stopped herself then because, well, this was all starting to feel a little circular. She had promised Rei that she would work tirelessly to fix all that suffering, hadn’t she? She did promise Rei that if she failed, Rei had permission to kill her, didn’t she? A prick of sudden fear. Rei wouldn’t dare, would she? But then, quite clearly, she was saying she still believed in that promise, as fanatically as those Matoists believed in their new goddess. Kill her or not, that fight was all Rei lived for now, she believed in it maybe more than Satsuki ever did. And she didn’t have anything else except it since she lost Ryuko.

Satsuki suddenly felt horribly ashamed. There was a challenge in those big, angry eyes she didn’t want to meet. *How can I tell you that I know that I’m in the wrong, but for my own sake I’m going to carry on? I think I deserve a chance to be happy, but then so does she just as much, and I took that from her.* Satsuki almost wanted to laugh at the situation. *Here we are once again. She’s like the one wrinkle I always fail to account for.*

Rei was surprised to watch these shameful thoughts overtake Satsuki and her whole demeanor shifted. Rei had never known her to back down from a challenge, but suddenly she turned aside, an aggrieved look on her face. She looked like she needed a hug.

“Rei, I-,”

But at that moment the door flung open and Nonon emerged, stumbling like she’d just been bashed over the head. “*Fuck.*”

“Nonon? How did it go?”

Nonon chuckled to herself, still drying her eyes. “I don’t know how she does it, I really don’t. Saiban got his answers though, don’t worry.”

Well, all of them except one. They’d never asked Ryuko about her origins, if Rosuketsu had been right about her. Truth was she was already carrying enough – Junketsu, Ragyo’s memories, knowledge of what happened after death. Odds are it would only give Ryuko further stress as she tried to figure out if it was true. Why add another burden?

But Rei left that meeting in Dandong with a very different takeaway. Had Satsuki truly broken her promise, so that Rei would find it acceptable to kill her? No, of course not. Her heart was still in the right place. Rei knew what was happening, though. She was too caught up in her infatuation with Ryuko that she’d been lulled into complacency. She needed a wakeup call. And Rei would make it as loud and harsh as possible.

## Chapter End Notes

This one was tough. Aside from real life being a bit nuts lately, it was hard to write because I ended up scrapping my initial plans for how this would go. Initially I had Rei still in a depressive funk after everything that had happened, but that isn't really how she turned out. She's tougher than that, I think. But that made how she would crop up to make more drama feel wrong. And I think people would've been either feeling way too bad for her or pissed at her. So it was tough to come up with something new. I honestly don't know if its all that good but eh.

The new version isn't really that different, but I think there's a level of subtlety to it besides two women who should know better having a catfight. Note how when Satsuki is considering that she took away Rei's chance at happiness, she doesn't consider the idea that happiness can come without Ryuko. And also how now that Rei's away from Ryuko she idealizes her, seeming to forget a bit that when they were together it was often a rocky relationship. That's all very deliberate, I hope you can interpret something about their relationships from it.

And then a little more lore and such thrown in there too, as it goes.

# Satsuki's bad day

## Chapter Summary

Okay, things are finally calming down here. Can't promise anything, but I think I should be able to get back on the chapter-a-week schedule from this point on.

Also this one may be typo heavy if you spot any that really take you out of it please tell me I'm too damn tired to do it now.

Discord: EnhLut\_spare#5463

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 2067

~~~~~

It was around five in the morning when Nonon texted Uzu. Miles apart though they were, with Nonon on the front lines and Uzu taking a weekend leave in Japan, they still awoke in sync to begin their morning stretches.

*\*hey you see Rei?\** She asked.

*\*Am I supposed to have?\** *\*Thought she was with you\** Came the response.

*\* nah she went home\* \*first time since she left\**

*\*Weird\**

*\*I dunno\** Nonon typed *\*she's been a bit weird since we got to Dandong\* \*not surprising, this places jcuked\* \*shit\* \*fucked\**

*\*Turn autocorrect on already\**

*\*never\**

*\*Well if I see her I'll say hi from you\**

*\*TY\**

*\*How's your deal going? You back on the move yet?\**

*\*nah\* \*snows hit pretty bad supply line sucks in these mountains\* \*we could get through but I don't wanna put that on the troops\**

Uzu waited a second, badly wanted to ask, “*So do you think you’ll be back in Japan for the holidays?*” but fearing a no. He wound up typing *\*Cold here too\* \*Might actually have a white Christmas\**

*\*goddanm volcano\**

It was a while before Nonon texted again and they carried on with their stretches. Nonon on a bleak high-rise with only Saiban keeping her warm, Uzu in the home gym in her apartment (he could sleep there if he wanted, what was the problem with that?). *\*Hey, what do you suppose your body count is?\** Nonon abruptly asked.

*\*370. That’s from Honnouji and the raid trip. Rest after that don’t count.\**

*\*ok but\* \*with the ones that dont count\**

*\*Who knows? Probably thousands\* \*Mostly from a couple big battles\* \*Why?\**

*\*dunno\* \*just thinking about that time we slaughtered a whole army right when we first got to Indonesia\* \*How many more times do you think we’ll have to do that before its over?\** She asked.

*\*Probably a couple more at least\**

*\*yeah probably\* \*alright well I gotta get going\**

*\*K\* \*Oh, should tell you, I had an interview with Haruka yesterday evening\* \*y’know, Ryuko’s ex?\**

*\*huh okay\**

*\*Yeah at first, I thought it was a bit weird til you and Houka let her profile you\* \*But she’s nice, good she turned out okay\**

*\*yeah it is\* \*really gotta go gnerals coming rn\**

*\*okay bye\** Uzu said, sending a perfunctory heart icon with his last message. It was only when Nonon didn’t send one back that he thought, *You know, something seems to be bothering her. Should probably call her later.*

But then he went down to his dojo, where he was working on a side project of teaching Shingantsu to some of his understudies, martial arts masters in their own right. And in no time, he forgot all about it.

~~~~~

Ryuko wasn’t naturally an early riser, Satsuki had figured that out long before they shared a bed. And that was something Satsuki had come to appreciate, because it meant that she had the rare privilege (and she did consider it a privilege) of rousing her. And before she did that, she had this one, pristine moment of solitude where she lay nude body entwined with Ryuko’s, staring up at the Shinto Gods painted on the ceiling. And she said a prayer to Amaterasu’s serene face.

*Thank you, God, fate, the universe, whatever’s out there. Thank you for letting me have this. When the time comes, I’ll take my punishmen, but please, let me go on like this one day*

*longer.*

And then she buried her face into the soft red glow of Ryuko's hair and just drank her in, her warmth, her smell, the feeling of her soft little breaths. Her own personal sun goddess. Eventually Ryuko's eyes slowly fluttered open and Satsuki felt her nose nuzzle further between her breasts, her lips curl into a smile. Ryuko made a noise that was an abortive attempt to say, "no, not yet" but just came out as a weak groan.

"Hey, Ryuko," She murmured, rolling over to flop back down onto her pillow with Ryuko half on top of her. Laboriously, Ryuko moved the rest of the way, wrapping herself around Satsuki's thigh.

Ryuko pushed herself up and squinted through the shutters. "'s early, damn," Her smile took on an eager turn and her eyes lit up, "This your way of asking for somethin'?" She looked down at Satsuki so innocently even as she moved her hand in between Satsuki's legs and... just kept it there. "Should never've encouraged these morning quickies. When'm I ever gonna sleep now?"

And Satsuki's chest felt frustratingly tight, like she was so excited for what was coming next that it wrapped back around to being scared. The way that Ryuko's hips moved and the weight of it, it was just... *wow*. "Mmmm, just this once?" She asked, trying not to sound like she was pleading.

"Huh? What're we doing here?" Ryuko asked smugly. Her teasing was almost unbearable, and Satsuki squirmed and giggled.

"Oh come *on*, please?" She giggled, "You see what you're doing right now, and you think you can afford to be coy?"

Ryuko grinned and dismounted, flopping down onto Satsuki with a big, aggressive kiss. And then she slid herself down Satsuki's body until her head was between her legs, "Alright then Sats. Tell me what you need. Tell me what you *want*."

"Ryuko –," *\*VRRRRRT!\** The vibration of Satsuki's phone, droning and insistent, suddenly cut through her anticipation quite abruptly. "Oh, what on Earth... Shiro? And he sent an emergency code too, what could it be?" The last time she'd gotten an emergency call from Shiro was the Monday after The Weekend, when REVOCS had first attacked. She had a right to be nervous, and Ryuko sat up at attention too.

"Shiro, hello."

*\*Satsuki, it's Naganohara.\** Shiro said quickly.

"Haruka?"

*\*Yes, and she's – and I can hardly believe it – but she's submitted an article to the Tokyo Shinbun, the national papers, and the Times. About Ryuko. About her parentage. Doesn't name her source, but nothing in there is inaccurate.\**

An adrenaline rush of sheer terror overtook Satsuki, and she sprang to her feet as though about to fight an invisible enemy. "*WHAT?* Did they – are you telling me – did these go out?"

*\*No, no they're slated for the evening editions via E-news and for tomorrow's physical paper. Doesn't look like an editor will read them there either because Haruka marked them as having been reviewed by her private editor, and after all the interviews she's done for us she's got enough clout they'll run whatever she writes.\**

Ryuko watched, seemingly at a loss, as Satsuki paced the room. After a moment to control her composure, Satsuki calmly said, "Okay, okay. So, can you have it struck down?"

*\*I'm afraid doing so would be censorship, totally illegal. And acting at all would tip our hand that Izanami and Misaki are in the system which... isn't legal either. Best we can do is sue for libel and defamation when it gets published. I'll contact your lawyers immediately.\**

"Yes, that is the only acceptable course of action. Tell me, when and how did they get to her. And where is she now? She is still alive, right?"

*\*Well, there is no suspicious activity on her phone at all. She had an interview with Uzu yesterday in a crowded restaurant so there's good audio of that, nothing out of the ordinary. But then she disappears in a tunnel on her way home, later resurfacing, apparently unharmed, in a hotel down by the airport.\**

"Any sign that she's being held hostage?"

*\*None. We'll send a surveillance team to go keep an eye on her immediately.\**

"Good. Thank you, Shiro. I suppose we knew this day would come. We'll come out on top in the courts, eventually," Satsuki sighed, "The only question is if the people will believe any of it."

*\*Our word against theirs,\** Shiro said, sounding distressed in that worn out way that was only obvious to those who knew him well, *\*But her tone, it's understandably disgusted. I want to believe she was kidnapped, but it doesn't feel like she wrote this under duress. I'm sorry, I wish there was more I could do. But this isn't like deleting months old text messages or our own data, trying to directly intervene here would be against the constitution **you** put in place. Which, I mean, our whole surveillance operation already is but... er, well I'll keep you apprised of the situation. Don't worry, we can hurry this thing.\**

If she'd been alone, or if there'd been anyone else around besides Ryuko, Satsuki would've kept stoic when Shiro hung up. But she was with Ryuko, this was her refuge, and she flopped onto the bed and slammed her hands over her face. "Ohhh *God!* Oh God, Ryuko! How could this happen!" She wailed, and when she felt Ryuko's hands on her shoulders, silently trying to massage away her horror, she took a few deep, heaving breathes and removed her hands from her face. "Oookay. Okay. Nothing to be done now. It's like Shiro said, our word against theirs."

"Sats, I swear I never said a *word* to Haruka," Ryuko said, looking down at Satsuki just as filled with dread as she was.

"I know, I know. You've always been discrete; this doesn't fall on you."

"Tell me it's gonna be alright, right?" Ryuko asked hesitantly.

Satsuki groaned and said sarcastically, "Oh, sure, it'll be *fine*. With the goon squad of lawyers we can sic on them the whole thing will be wrapped up in two days. We'll be a few



million Yen shorter, but nothing in our lives will *change*. Unless, of course, people believe this, in which case-,”

“We’re finished,” Ryuko concluded.

“But that’s always been a risk,” Satsuki said, “We expected that REVOCS might try this play one day. What’s shocking is that they managed to get to Haruka which might make the whole thing seem a bit more credible, but aside from that Shiro and I anticipated this.”

Ryuko sat up suddenly and said, “You don’t suppose that Rei-,”

“No. No, Rei’s not an idiot. She hates me, but she knows if she did this, she’d be even more finished than us. I’d expect you to give her *some* credit,” Satsuki said dismissively.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” Ryuko shrugged. “In that case, if Haruka’s been kidnapped, don’t you think I should jet over there right now and take care of the situation.” Which Satsuki read as implicitly saying “*And if she wasn’t, and did this intentionally, then all the more reason for me to slap some sense into her, right?*”

“It’s your call. But the surveillance team will figure out if she needs help without raising any alarms. What do you think, would she accuse us of her own free will?” Satsuki asked.

Ryuko frowned, “Before today I’d’ve said hell no. I thought she still idolized me. Ah fuck, she *is* in danger, isn’t she?” Suddenly a strange blank look crossed Ryuko’s face. Something had just occurred to her. “Hold on, hold on,” She suddenly drifted off the bed and onto the floor, clothes materializing around her, crown tracing itself into existence. She scooped up a pile of papers from her nightstand and started leafing through them. A copy of the document establishing her as queen, easier to keep it around than memorize it. “Okay, who would you go to if you wanted someone to write you up a congressional motion and pretend it was their idea?”

“What?” Satsuki asked, but quickly understood what Ryuko was getting at, “Probably Junichiro Okawara. One of Nonon’s socialite friends from back in the day. Owes her his career, so he’ll always be an available puppet.”

“Great, great. Where’s his office at?”

“Hmm... main congress building, third floor, room fifty-one. It’s the second door on your right from the stairwell by the-,”

“- plaza with the big cube statue made of little red people, yeah I walked by it every day on my way to classes freshman year. Alright, sounds good. I’m off,” She flung open the windows and lifted off the ground.

“Now wait just a moment,” Satsuki stood up and hurried over to her, grabbing her bathrobe and pulling it around her before she made it to the window. “What exactly is your plan here. I know you can call the congress to an immediate vote using your emergency powers, but it’s still going to be unconstitutional to strike an article from the public news without letting legal matters run their course.”

“Well, it’s unconstitutional *now*, that’s the thing. But remember that time we had to go in to clarify what one of my emergency powers meant?”

“Whether command over the military meant command over private arms manufacturers too, yeah,” Satsuki nodded, (the conclusion being a unanimous ‘yes’).

“Well, thinkin’ we can do the same with this one here,” Ryuko said, pointing to an article in her wad of papers. “See what I mean.”

Satsuki did, and said as much, “It might work. But Ryuko, you do realize what that would give you, right?”

“Pretty much unlimited power to censor whatever I want?”

“Well, um, yes. Are you sure that’s really what you want?”

“No, it’s really not. But like, they’re gonna try and take you away from me? I’m queen. If I can’t do something about that, who can?” Ryuko said, drifting off the ground with a reassuring smile. A deep, keening feeling of warmth gripped Satsuki as she watched her tear off into the sky. Ryuko would fix it. She would put it all on herself to make this right, damn the consequences.

Unless she didn’t. Satsuki’s smile faded slowly. As she watched the trail of flaming red light disappear into the bleak winter sky, all the other possibilities started to creep in. If congress balked at this outrageous request (they wouldn’t, would they?), if Shiro and their surveillance had missed a place where the article would be published (impossible, right?), if people believed it (they wouldn’t, they loved Ryuko, didn’t they?). *This is it*, she realized. *This could be the beginning of the end. And here I am, just waiting and hoping on Ryuko to save me.*

After fifteen minutes or so simply laying there fretting, she got up, cleaned herself up, got dressed, and went down to her office to do some work. What else could she do?

~~~~~

Satsuki had over the years acquired many offices. She had the one in her cottage, one in the congress building, the one in the research complex, hell she even had one at Tokyo University in the graduate student offices though she never used it. Usually these were barren spaces, with only the desk Satsuki needed to work and the chairs people she met with needed to sit on. Her office in the lake manor wasn’t that. This was to be *hers*, her refuge, her place of solitude even more so than the bedroom. And she’d gone to great pains to make it feel that way.

The office was located directly below her and Ryuko’s bedroom, and had almost the exact same dimensions, which meant it was a spacious square room with one side opening onto a balcony that overlooked the lake. In the center was Satsuki’s desk, with main doors in the corners, on either side of the balcony. No distractions there, but behind her the rooms stretched on with walls lined with bookshelves, a reading nook with a sofa and fireplace, and even a small table for when she felt like taking a meal there. Everything about it was lovingly chosen, all fitting to a calm, earthy color scheme. Dark wood, green carpets, it was a den away from the garishness of the rest of the world – Satsuki liked to think it looked very old-fashioned. Ryuko and Mako had even gone through the trouble of putting up classy Christmas decorations that matched and complimented it with little bursts of red and silver.

A lot of good that did. All that bright merriment only served to mock her now. Hollow aluminum baubles, fabricated and factory made. Peddling some worn out, advertising friendly idea of holiday cheer, useless in the face of the situation she’d gotten herself into. It reminded her of the time when she was five and had broken her arm in training and Soroi attempted to console her with

a stuffed animal. Not like she was any better though. It stabbed at her to think, *what an illusion it was, that sense of security I had when I decorated this place. I let myself think it couldn't all come crashing down in a heartbeat.*

But none of that mattered when she sat down in front of her computer, reports from cities and provinces around the league in front of her, and got lost in the work. Cross reference the reports from a city to make sure nobody was lying about conditions on the ground, then call to be sure. Then draft up a set of orders for how to spend whatever resources were available and alleviate whatever the most pressing problem was. Then hop in a conference call with the local leaders and see if they thought it was doable. Revise accordingly and send it out. Then it was on to the next problem. Though technically her position was merely a high-ranking general, in practice issues came before her because they needed to stamp of ultimate authority and, more importantly, wisdom.

For a little while she didn't even have to think about what was going to happen to her. They needed her for her mind, not her honor or her reputation. And REVOCS couldn't take that from her.

The hours passed by, and around noon she was snapped from her reverie by a phone call from her secretary at her government office.

*\*My Lady, Rei is here. She was hoping to arrange a meeting with you about... your comments on her housing plan for Dandong, I believe.\**

*Oh, that's right, Nonon mentioned Rei was coming home this weekend. I should probably speak to her in person, make it clear my critiques were constructive and overall, I liked the plan. It's the least I can do to try and bury the hatchet.* "Tell her I'm working from home today, but I'd be happy to have a conference call with her," Satsuki said.

*\*Okay, I'll tell her, but she seemed to be really hoping to talk to you in person,\** The young man said, and then went on in a whisper *\*My Lady, I know it's not my place, but it really feels like she's apologetic. Or, maybe trying to be friendly. Make of it what you will.\**

"Really? She is?" Satsuki said quickly, "Well, that may be, but..." *Oh, what the hell, if she's willing to come there's no harm dragging her here. Not like I'll be rubbing it in her face considering I may lose all this tomorrow.* "Well, if she's willing to come out here, I'd be willing to have an in person meeting."

*\*Okay, I'll relay that.\** He said, and then moments later called back to confirm that Rei was on her way.

Oh, this was probably a mistake. But what more was another argument with Rei going to do today? As she unenthusiastically ate her lunch Satsuki weighed her last encounter with Rei. She'd been frustrated that Satsuki had lost her drive towards societal reform, when Rei still believed that working tirelessly towards that utopian ideal was the only thing worth devoting her life to. Satsuki knew she wouldn't activate the old promise, the right to kill her, just because of that. In fact, it wouldn't be hard at all to show her that she'd never forgotten.

~~~~~

As soon as she walked into the office Rei knew that the plan had worked. Reminded of the fragility of her position Satsuki's thoughts turned to where they should be. To her legacy, to

what impact she could make, to what she could do for humanity. Oh, when this was all revealed Satsuki would never forgive her, and Ryuko would probably be furious too, but that was fine. Because Satsuki was smart enough to see the lesson. That much was obvious in the way she was frantically scrawling over her papers.

*Now, remember to be conciliatory, be nice,* She and Furashada reminded each other. *We must make her remember how good it feels to lead. Make her remember that its not Ryuko's theatrics or Nonon's bloodshed that really gets it done, but us sweating over every little detail.*

"Rei, hello," Satsuki nodded, in a tone that was surprisingly friendly, "Come, take a seat. I'm told you've taken a look at my comments on your Dandong plan and had some questions."

"Yes, actually," Rei went with the cordial tone and, with surprisingly little force of will, sat down across from Satsuki. Those annoyingly inscrutable eyes were directly downward, not at her, and when Satsuki did look up there was no hostility there.

"Now, I must make it clear that my critiques aren't meant to take anything from the overall quality of this document. It's short and to the point and I think the rules you set out for citizens and law enforcement are things they can actually follow. I only think there are some details you'll need to clarify and some translation issues with your Mandarin. Are we clear on that?"

"Oh definitely."

"Good, then let's begin."

Going over the minutia of Rei's policy was... stiff, to say the least. But in spite of that they both managed to work efficiently, cordially on it, and come up with a revised version that they could agree was an improvement. When they were done Rei stood and said, "Well, thank you for allowing me into your home."

*Do not mention why this should be considered a big deal,* they both thought.

"It's the least I could do. I did promise you I'd read it over, after all. Oh, and don't forget to send your next policy document to me as well."

"Er, sure. Speaking of, I was hoping I'd get some more work done today, and it's a long run back to Tokyo even with Furashada. I don't suppose there's some spare office or table that you'd let me use, is there? I mean, it's a big house, nobody will even notice I'm there."

Rei expected this to be met with some resistance, but Satsuki thought, *a perfect chance to show her I'm serious about this.* And she said, "Well, if that's all you need, why not take the table over there?"

"Wha – really?"

"You might as well. In case you find something else that requires my attention."

So Rei, somewhat hesitantly, set her laptop up at the table behind Satsuki and began her own work. Furashada kept an eye on Satsuki for her, all the while nervously rehearsing how they would reveal the ruse. Even he thought this bordered on madness, and he was of one mind with Rei on everything. Still, he had to admit she seemed to be right about Satsuki. Her drive wasn't

like Rei's – a constantly burning penance walk, every day reminding her what she'd been complicit in. She was able to eventually think that maybe her work was done. And that's why she needed this reminder that life was unstable and cruel and that was why you had to do what you could for humanity when you had the chance.

They worked silently for almost an hour. Eventually, it was Rei who broke the silence, saying, "It's drafty in here."

Satsuki nodded, "I know. It's colder today than the forecasts said."

"Just Krakatoa on its own is wreaking havoc on the weather. We're lucky we've managed to stop them from erupting more."

"Truly. You know, I was a child the last time there was a truly cold winter. I thought I'd be happier to see them come back."

"Hmm," Rei made a noise of vague agreement, and they went back to silence. But now the spell was broken, and a few minutes later Satsuki said, "Now see, here's one of those where the standard procedure breaks down. Sydney Australia." Rei didn't say anything, so Satsuki said, "I seem to recall you had some stronger words than that last time I mentioned this."

Rei sighed and said, "Fine. Forward me what you have." After she'd finished reading it, Rei said, "It is the problem picture perfect. It was nearly razed when REVOCS first attacked but now it's liveable, so why is there no growth? Why is it languishing in poverty? You think you've given them the opportunity to regrow their businesses and industry, but all they can really do is spend that time looking at all the stuff that got wrecked because who are they going to do business with? Applying topical solutions to one city at a time isn't going to make sure they're all fitting together into one new economy, we need policy that's a lot bigger, more sweeping."

Satsuki frowned, "We've already got the League mandated standards for each country's constitution and rights, term limits, law enforcement, state healthcare, and environmental regulations – you're suggesting we go further than that?"

Rei shrugged, "I mean, truth is I'm fairly sure Nonon thinks I'm a communist. If the shoe fits."

Satsuki turned around then and looked at her with an utterly inscrutable expression, "And are you?"

"Pssh, Nonon's the sort where if you explained to her what a communist actually believes she'd think it sounded pretty good, but she was brought up in an insular culture where that's about the worst thing you could call anyone," Satsuki made a little hum chuckle at that. "As for me, I think we could stand to lean further in that direction, not all the way. The public will is there for a system with a little more international cooperation, a little more guaranteed to the average person. And if we don't step up central regulation where fossil fuels are concerned, at *least*, well then it's all for nothing long term."

"Well that's - hmm. You may be right," Satsuki said. "I thought a program like that was bit too ambitious for the present moment, but maybe it's time. I'm surprised though, it was my impression you didn't approve of the League."

“No, the League I have no problem with. It’s the whole ‘constitutional monarchy’ thing I can’t stand. It’s just a long, slow slide from there to there to...” She looked up at Satsuki pointedly. “You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Quite.” Satsuki outward reaction was minor, but Rei was convinced there was a deeper feeling of unease and guilt behind that slight twitch.

~~~~~

Haruka felt like she was going to throw up. She’d tried sleeping, watching TV, laying on the bathroom floor, nothing had helped. The only thing that would make it okay was when her phone chimed that it was 5 pm. Then she would scurry over to her laptop and switch out that awful article about Ryuko and Satsuki for a completely inoffensive interview with Uzu. Then Rei would reveal what she’d done and take all the blame, and everything would be alright. Then she would take the flash drive the original copy was on and smash it to bits, and the secret would be gone once again.

She almost couldn’t take it, she wanted to go and do it *now*. But Rei had explained everything, and she agreed. This could never get out, but Satsuki didn’t know Rei knew that. And that meant she could use it. Because Haruka also agreed that Satsuki was born and raised a dictator, that she would corrupt Ryuko and that was unacceptable. She had to understand that there would be consequences for that.

Still, until that moment, all Haruka could do was pace and fret. Into the hotel’s bathroom, out into the foyer, into the bedroom, out onto the balcony, then turn around and-

There was Ryuko.

Haruka gasped so loud and horrified that her lungs were momentarily flushed clean of all air. There she was, leaning in the doorway, utterly casual. She’d shifted the shape of her outfit to something a little simpler, just a shimmery blouse and black pants, and dropped the glow in her hair down to minimal levels. If you didn’t know better, she might have looked just like any ordinary woman.

Haruka knew better.

“Oh god,” She sobbed, beginning to hyperventilate, “Ohgodohgodohgodohgod!”

Ryuko just smiled and said, “Hey. We gotta have a talk.”

~~~~~

It was 4:45 when Satsuki got a text from Ryuko.

*\*Everything’s taken care of. It’s gone.\* \*Oh, and Haruka’s fine\**

With a contented sigh, Satsuki leaned back in her chair. A great weight had lifted off her, and it was immediately obvious how much her mood had improved. Rei asked, “What’s up?” But a sinking feeling was starting to set in, a suspicion that she had been outmaneuvered.

“Oh, Ryuko just took care of something I was worrying about for me.”

“Really? What was it?”

“Well I probably shouldn’t tell you, but you’ll find out eventually anyway,” She swiveled her chair around to fully face Rei. “REVOCS got to Haruka, and intimidated her into writing an article exposing the truth of Ryuko’s parentage. I guess they figured that coming from the Kamui Corps’ unofficial biographer it would seem more credible. In any case, it doesn’t matter now. She’s safe, and the article will never see the light of day.”

Fury rose in Rei’s throat, but she bit it down. *Okay, that’s fine. Maybe there was some legal technicality I missed that let them take it down. Or maybe they worked up the guts to actually go to the newspaper editors and ask them to take it down, though that’s the last thing I’d expect since that would make the editors actually **read** the article. But if either of those is true, then it’s fine. Better, actually. I can just point out to Satsuki how worrying about this helped get her back on track, she’ll say ‘oh, that’s a good point’, and then if Haruka keeps her mouth shut I won’t even get blamed. If either of those is true, though.* So she asked, “No way! They got to Haruka? How’d you manage to stop it?”

“Oh, so you know Royal Emergency Power 21b? Gives Ryuko and her representatives the power to demolish, move, otherwise alter any object they deem fit during times of national emergency. Including natural features and artworks. Now the original point was so that if ever a building needed to be demolished for a military operation, or a road widened, it could get done swiftly. But we had Junichiro Okawara introduce a clarification motion arguing that the term ‘artworks’ was vague and that it should be interpreted as including all forms of artistic expression, including written works, considering that was what the letter of the law said. And Ryuko called congress to an immediate vote, they voted it in, and then she had them contact the newspapers and request the article be struck. No questions asked.”

Rei’s face fell. “You did what.”

Suddenly it all clicked for Satsuki. *If Haruka’s fine, then that means...* “It was you, wasn’t it?”

“W-what? You’re joking, right?” Rei blurted, but that moment of hesitation was all Satsuki needed. Rei watched her face going from incredulity to shock to raw, towering anger, and finally seething rage so cold it almost wrapped around to being amused.

“Don’t lie to me now,” Satsuki scowled.

And Rei sighed and said, “Alright, yes, I did it. I’m the one who told Haruka.”

“You have one minute to explain to me how blackmailing me – no, blackmailing *Ryuko* – risking your friend’s journalistic reputation and your bonds with the rest of our circle, and then coming into my house to gawk was supposed to pay off. And then you’re *gone*,” Satsuki spat the words out with utter scorn.

And there it was. It was like Satsuki had punched her in the gut. Suddenly Rei was on her feet, her axe whipped out of her pocket and unfurled to full size, blade leveled right next to Satsuki’s neck. With a barely audible gulp, Satsuki understood.

She didn’t have a chance to notice it, but Ryuko had just sent her another text. It just read *\*Trust me\**.

“Oh. I-I see.”

“I didn’t want to do this,” Rei said, voice trembling, “I just wanted to shake you up, get your mind out of this... *palace* and back into the real world! It was never going to go out, nobody but her and me ever laid eyes on it! W-we even interviewed Uzu so we’d have a different article to drop in its place. This whole thing what just going to be a little lesson, a harmless prank. But no, the moment a single threat comes anywhere near you, what do you do? Unlimited censorship powers! And you sit here, talking about what’s right for league, how maybe we could lean a bit more socialist, but when push comes to shove none of that applies to *you*, does it?”

*Rei! No no no have you gone insane!* Furashada nearly drowned out her own thoughts, but she pushed it back. *You can’t do this Rei, you’ll kill us both!* For the first time in months they slipped out sync, so totally that it physically hurt. She could feel Furashada going stiff around her, trying to stop her from moving.

“‘If the day ever comes when you find something I’ve done or said objectionable, you may kill me’. That’s what you said. And now I see you never really learned. Inside you’re still the Student Council President, aren’t you Satsuki?”

“Rei, you’ve got it wrong. This was Ryuko’s idea,” Satsuki said urgently.

“Even if that was true, this is far from your first offense. No, that started when you *fucked your own sister!*”

“... So this is about her, then?” Satsuki said, gulping again, louder. She had to tilt her chin high to stop the axe from slicing right across her neck, but even so she kept calm. It infuriated Rei, she still thought she could talk her way out of this! “I won’t protest. What we’ve done, it is a sin. For what it’s worth, I am sorry for how I hurt her.”

“No, not it’s not *just* about her either. You do understand how this will end, don’t you? We’ll die one day, but she’ll still be queen, and people will forget there was ever a time before their goddess ruled over them. That has to be stopped now, before it’s all entrenched. And if you begin her reign by whispering in her ear, telling her it’s okay to abuse her powers, it’ll be like Ragyo all over again. But forever. You’re teaching her to abuse them, you know it’s true.”

“I don’t want that,” Satsuki insisted, “You know I don’t want that!”

“It doesn’t matter! You’ll do it without even seeing what you’re doing, that’s what I realized today!” She tilted her axe, slowly because she had to fight Furashada for every inch. “I know I won’t be thanked or forgiven for this.” *I’m scared*, the thought intruded from Furashada “I’m scared. I won’t be anyone’s hero. It doesn’t matter. If there’s even a chance you’ll turn her into the next Ragyo, it needs to be done.”

“Rei –,” Satsuki started, but Rei had leaned back to begin her swing. She closed her eyes.

And opened them again moments later to find Rei frozen stiff, Furashada gripping her like a vice so tight she could barely breath. “Fura...shada,” She rasped. He’d made his move – even he wasn’t sure how much of him wanted to do it, how much of her didn’t want to. But one way or another enough of their shared consciousness rebelled, it was simply unacceptable. “I can’t... do it,” The words that came from her mouth weren’t hers, “Satsuki, run!” His frantic orange eyes burned into her.



Satsuki tore herself from her desk and broke out in a dead run, while Rei stood frozen still, warring against herself. The strong telepathic link she and Furashada shared was betraying her. One moment it seemed impossible, unthinkable to kill Satsuki, the very thought made her sick to her stomach. And then at the next everything else faded out but pounding, cold dead certainty that history's next great monster in the making was currently slipping away. And the next she just hated, hated, hated that ice-cold cunt who'd stolen Ryuko from her. And then she loved her, this woman she'd known almost all her life, who'd saved her from Ragyo's indoctrination. It was impossible to tell what thoughts or feelings belonged to who anymore.

But her better half never expected her to, in a desperately quick move, drop her axe and *yank* Furashada right off her body. With a howl, her head was split with such a pain that she instantly passed out, coming too as she hit the floor with a thud. But just as soon she was back up. She knew Satsuki kept a handgun in all her offices, in case of assassination attempt, and... there it was! She wrenched it from its concealed slot in a false drawer and whipped around just as Satsuki made it to the door.

"Stop! Stop or I'll do it!"

Satsuki did stop. Certainty set in that this wasn't just theatrics, that Furashada couldn't save her now. Rei really was going to kill her.

*[Rei I'm begging you, don't do it!]* Furashada had reformed himself, propped up on his skirts much the same way Senketsu had. He wasn't very fast like this, but he could sob and watch his world teeter on the brink of collapse quite convincingly, *[Think about what it'll do to Ryuko! To our family!]*

"I'm sorry," She said through gritted teeth, holding her free hand to her temple in an attempt to fight down the brutal migraine that was beginning, "I can't back down now. I need to do this. But at least you aren't involved in it."

*[I'm feeling pretty involved!]*

"It's the best I can do," She said. Then, addressing Satsuki, "I'm sorry, I really am." Satsuki stayed silent, head spinning as she stared down the inky void of the gun's barrel. She knew Rei was a fine shot, she wouldn't miss. That blackness was going to turn to into a bright flash, and then it would be over. And for what?

"Just answer one thing for me. There's really no way I can convince you this was Ryuko's choice? You really think it's all because of me?"

Rei scoffed, "Of course it was! You know what she said when I first found out about you two? 'It's like a disease'. She should have gotten help for it, and instead what did *you* do? And ever since then. She's a good person, she never wanted this, she wanted to be a normal girl! So who do we have to blame for what happened except *you*."

That was all wrong, Satsuki knew it. Ryuko was the one who visited the other side, who came back with the realization that she could never lead a normal life. But yet, when had Satsuki done anything to stop the rest of what came next? She could have put her foot down when Nonon suggested making her queen, or when Ryuko wrote blank checks for things she technically didn't have any power over. It was with a bitter sense of irony that Satsuki realized Rei had a point even though she was had everything else backwards. Satsuki hadn't been whispering in her ear, but maybe she should have. Either way, it was too late now.

“You may have a point...” She murmured absently.

Too late? She considered rushing Rei down. She could probably anticipate the shot enough to throw his head out of harm's way, and Rei was weaker than her so once she got there it would be over. She thought she could never forgive herself if she did, but all of a sudden that didn't matter that much.

She couldn't think of the last time she'd stared down certain death outside of battle, without a means of fighting it. It was all so horribly real it was hard to think. That feeling people described as one's life flashing before their eyes, that wasn't really what it was. It was just a dawning comprehension of everything she was about to lose at the hands of this frail, half naked woman who was shaking like a leaf in the drafty office. The feeling of the sun, the wind, the taste of food, that comforting feeling of a sword in her hands, of reading and learning. Everything else was secondary to the sheer sensation of it, and for the first time maybe ever Satsuki realized that she wanted to live for her own sake. Not for Ryuko, not for her family, not for the Earth or Humanity or anything. She just wanted to *live*.

So she tensed and braced herself, just in case she got her chance, and said, “Rei, *please*. Anything else you want, any other concession that will make this right, I will. do it. I just don't want to die. Not now. Please.”

And it did nearly make Rei cave, to see this great woman begging with glassy eyes for another chance. But she steeled herself and said, “Quiet! You don't have a choice in this anymore!”

“Well, that's partially accurate.”

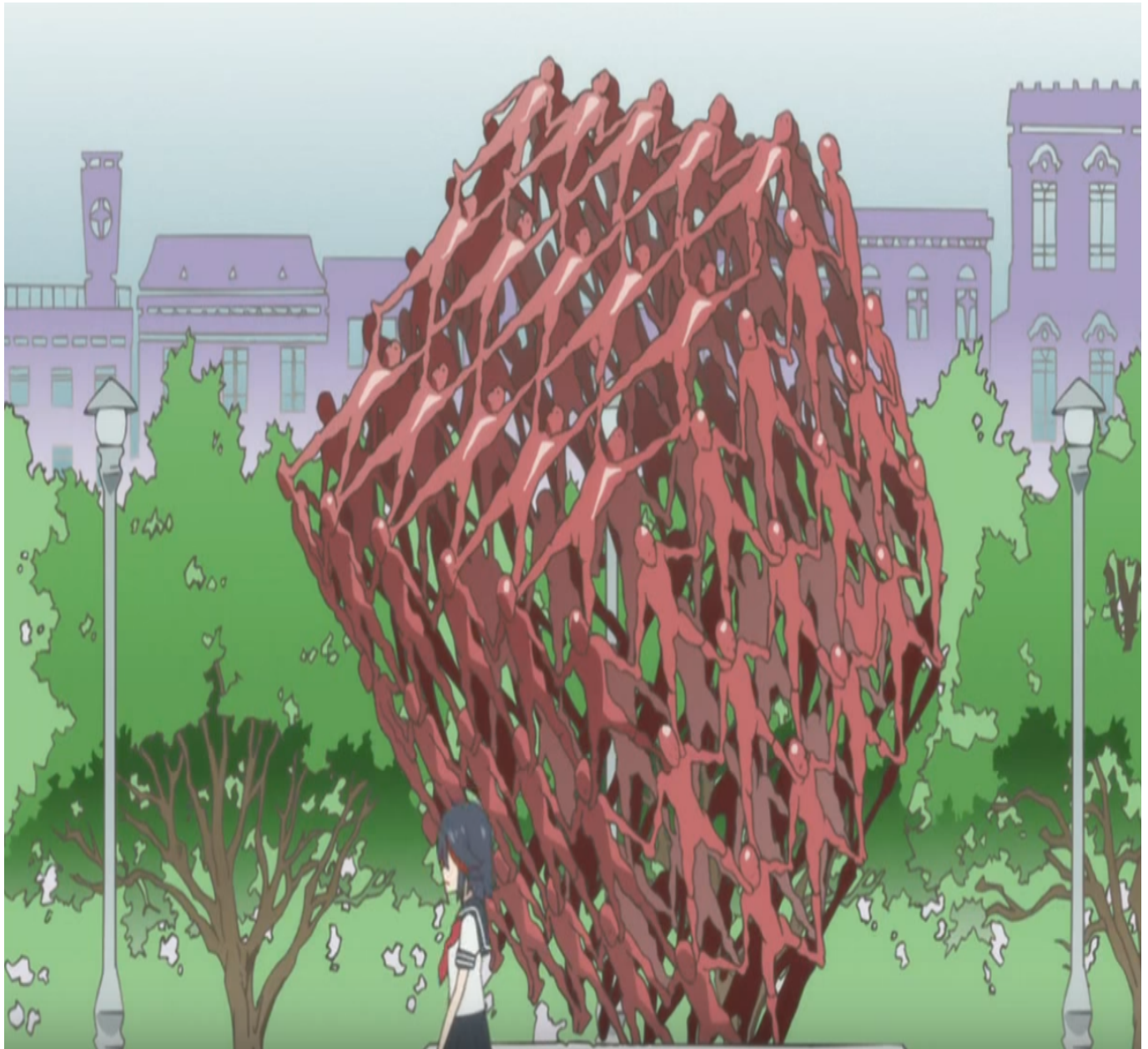
“Wha-“

“Ryuko?”

“But you see, none of you have a choice anymore. In fact, you all haven't had a choice in how this turns out pretty much since this morning.”

The balcony doors flew open and in with an icy breeze came a burst of flaming red-orange light. And there was Ryuko, as radiant and serene as the sun itself.

(This is the statue Ryuko's talking about before she leaves in the morning, for those who didn't get the easter egg)



## Chapter End Notes

Wow, now this one was a beast to write. I have this weird feeling like it might be kinda controversial, I dunno. Especially considering it ends on a cliffhanger. It took me a long time to get this into a shape I liked even though the original kernel of the idea was one of the first things I came up with for the story outline. Other details kept evolving and so the way it went had to evolve too. But hey, we're finally getting the Rei-conciliation, only been foreshadowed since effectively the OVA! Stayed tuned for the follow-up, and let me know your thoughts on this one in the comments.

# Divine Intervention: 1

## Chapter Summary

Yeah yeah yeah, I know it's another 2 parter. Genuinely pissed I couldn't get the whole thing done in the timeframe I set, but this chapter is a beast and that is the Symbiosis experience baby! This one also went through a lot of iterations. It's a major payoff moment in several really lengthy plot/character arcs. I had to go back and reread my own stuff just to make sure it worked right.

It is also 3am and I just can't write any more right now otherwise I'd finish the whole thing right now. But this means I have time to flesh the ending out to the length it deserves over tomorrow and probably the next day. The crazy thing is as an anime I think this whole thing, both parts might not even be a full episode. Which just goes to show how much work gets put into every episode I guess

December 2067

~~~~~

*\*CRACK!\**

Rei hadn't even meant to fire. Ryuko had arrived, so it was all over. But the realization of what that meant, that her punishment was coming, made her tremble uncontrollably as panic took over. Her fingers just twitched and that was it. With her hand shaking so much her aim wasn't even on target – she'd lined up a perfect shot on Satsuki's heart but now the gun was angled to blow a nice hole in Satsuki's shoulder.

If it even hit, which it wasn't going to.

Faster than even Furashada could see, Ryuko was between them. She burned with a dazzling light, red in her hair glowing and flicking, wings behind her spread to their full extent. Pinched neatly between her fingers was the bullet. She said, "You see? No choice at all."

"*N-no,*" *Rei* dropped to her knees, utterly in despair. "I didn't *mean* to!"

"Hold on one sec," Ryuko smoothly produced her phone and made a quick call, "Hey, security? Disregard that gunshot, it was an accidental discharge of Satsuki's personal defense weapon. Everyone's fine. Schedule a carpenter to come in tomorrow and fix the hole though, okay?"

"...Hole?" Satsuki asked absently, and in response Ryuko flicked and with a faint whistling noise the bullet launched from her hand and buried itself in the door frame on the other side of the room, behind Rei.

"So that's that. I guess you'll have to live with the household security guards thinking you've got shitty trigger discipline, Sats, but that's how it goes," Ryuko said calmly. She was

feeling pretty calm, too. The others, obviously, weren't. But that would change in due time. "Now, what're we doing here?"

[*Mother!*] In that awkward, brachiating way that kamui were capable of on their own, Furashada scrambled over to Ryuko. She scooped him up in her arms and squeezed him, gentle and reassuring. [*I'm so sorry!*] He sobbed.

"Hey, hey, it's alright. I'm here now," She murmured. She looked up at Satsuki and Rei. It was a pathetic sight, Rei trembling and wild-eyed in her underclothes, Satsuki sweating bullets. It didn't suit them at all. "So Sats, judging by how freaked out you're looking either you don't trust me, or you didn't get my last text, and since I don't buy the first option I guess I messed up the timing."

"Your... text?"

"Eh, you can't win 'em all. Either way, I didn't mean to give you such a scare, sorry!" She grinned sheepishly

Satsuki could barely wrap her head around it, "You mean you knew?"

Rei, on the other hand, shouted hoarsely, "How, how, *how*? How did you figure it out?"

"Oh, I got it almost immediately," Ryuko chuckled, "I just slipped over to the other side and took a peek at where you were yesterday. You did good, honestly, getting the message to Haruka and meeting with her without getting Izanami and Misaki's attention. You wouldn't have noticed though Sats, 'cuz I got back before I even left."

Satsuki gasped, "There was a moment when you abruptly stopped worrying if Haruka had been kidnapped or not. You knew then?"

"Yup," Ryuko shrugged.

"You... idiot!" Satsuki's pent up emotions abruptly found a new outlet, "I could have been killed! You could have stopped this; you could have *warned* me! I – you *lied* to me!" The extent of this betrayal was only now coming into focus for her.

"Yeah, I guess I kinda did. Sorry. If I hadn't though, we wouldn't have ended up in this situation."

"*This* is what you *wanted*?"

"Sure. I couldn't let you have the upper hand on Rei," Ryuko said, gently setting down Furashada and going over to her. "But I mean, come on. You didn't serious think I'd let her kill you, did you?"

"Ryuko..." Satsuki growled.

"Hey, Satsuki, you gotta *trust me*," Ryuko held out her hands. "I mean, c'mon. I've done worse."

And with a sigh, Satsuki caved and dropped into Ryuko's arms. "You're the worst." In spite of it all, she was beyond relieved to be alive. Whatever Ryuko had done, whatever her plan was, it didn't change the fact that she was doing it for her. In the end, nothing else mattered. Why

even bother question why Ryuko did it, if it meant that she would live? “I’m still mad though,” She said, and her eyes proved that wasn’t a lie. Glassy, but hard.

“No, totally, I gotcha. I mean hey, even I’m a little annoyed too. I had plans today!” She grinned, and when Satsuki’s eyebrows flew up, she held her hands defensively and said, “Kidding! Kidding! And what about you?” She turned her attention to Rei, “I guess you’re on board with going to jail for the rest of your life, huh? Too bad that’s not happening either. You got anything to say to me?”

“No I’m... I’m done. I know when I’ve lost,” Rei said.

“Really? No, ‘You toyed with me’, ‘Why did you make me suffer this humiliation’, ‘You’re turning into a dictator and you’re too dumb to see it’, ‘Why did you chose Satsuki over me’, ‘What does she have I don’t’, ‘How long have you been manipulating me’, none of that?”

Rei just looked at her, both unwilling to stoop to begging for mercy or expecting any.

“Oh. That’s too bad,” She sighed, “It just means we’ll have to spend more time dragging it out of you, won’t we?”

“What do you mean by that?” Satsuki asked.

“Well that’s the thing. I thought about the situation for a while and I think I figured out how to turn it into an opportunity,” She stood between Satsuki and Rei. “It’s time I fixed the mess I’ve made. See I’ve got, like, eighty-odd years max with you left – not a lot. And I’m not interested in spending a second more of that time with you outta my life, Rei, or with you two at each other’s throats. I want you both, and I’m sick of this awkwardness, dodging each other and making everyone else be careful what they say. Plus, if Rei’s got a legit issue with how I’m running things, we might as well hear it now. But, on the other hand extreme situations require extreme solutions, and I would say this counts. So, here’s my brute force fix. We’re gonna sit here, talk it out, and after however long it takes when we leave this room, we’ll leave as the best of friends. Rei and Satsuki, you two’ll be like, calling each other up every damn day that’s how good of friends you’ll be, and Rei and me we’ll be – well, I’ll settle for less than that. You won’t have any beef with us being engaged, and Sats you’ll have no hangups about how we used to date. And Sats... ideally you won’t still be mad at me. Deal?”

Neither Rei nor Satsuki spoke at first. What Ryuko was suggesting just sounded too insane. “I don’t see how... no, that’s not acceptable,” Satsuki said, “I made a promise to Rei, and she has to decide if she will act on it. It’s a matter of my honor. But if she doesn’t...” (And at this point Satsuki was fairly certain she wouldn’t) “Then I want her out of my house. Before today I had hoped for an opportunity like this, but now I see. Our differences cannot be so easily reconciled.”

And Rei simply said, “I won’t do it.”

Ryuko chuckled. It was sadder than it was funny, but it was still kind of funny that these two who she otherwise considered among the smartest people she knew could become so unreasonable. For her stupid ass. “No, you don’t get it. See, I said you don’t have a choice in the matter. And that’s the truth. And I also figured we wouldn’t even get this far if you weren’t more pissed at me than you were at each other. So -”

She lifted her fingers and luminous red-orange threads shot from them, too fast for either woman to react. Their arms were lashed to their sides and they were corded up, tight but not painfully so, lifted off the ground and plopped into chairs – Satsuki in her desk chair and Rei on the sofa, which Ryuko used another thread to pull over until the two of them were sitting practically knee to knee.

“Ryuko!” Rei grunted.

“The hell do you think you’re doing!” Satsuki yelled as well.

“Let us go!”

Having fully secured them both, Ryuko gingerly lifted Furashada up and climbed with him onto the desk, where she sat, forming a triangle between them. Rei and Satsuki glared at her.

“Alright. Now, let’s chat.”

~~~~~

Ryuko expected them to be hesitant to talk. They wouldn’t have been themselves if they didn’t stubbornly cling to the hope that they could outlast her. It was kind of adorable, actually. But half an hour of silently avoiding eye contact, even as Ryuko slowly inched their seats together until Satsuki’s dress was right up against Rei’s bare knees, that was enough.

“Y’know, it’s really just your own time you’re wasting. I’m the immortal one here, remember? I *guarantee* I can keep this up longer than either of you,” Ryuko said, causally leaning back on the desk to prove her point.

Neither of them responded, so Ryuko eventually added, “Y’know, this’s what I love about both of you. You’re so damn sure you’re right you’re willing to sit here til you starve to death.

Orrr, I can call down to the kitchen, have them make anything you like. We’ve got everything to make Takoyaki with that sweet sauce you like, Rei,” Ryuko said in a lilting, tempting tone, “oh, and I don’t know if you saw Sats but the fresh salmon you ordered came in yesterday. “ ‘Course, I’m gonna want to see some progress before I do that.”

Satsuki and Rei looked utterly forlorn. Ryuko had them there, willful though they were they were also made of flesh and blood. And they were getting hungry.

“I don’t think I’m right,” Rei finally said. “Or that what I... tried to do was right. I didn’t come here today planning to murder anyone.”

“But blackmailing us, that was right?” Satsuki snidely inserted.

“No! No, but when I saw you undermining everything we’ve built, I had to do *something*. I couldn’t just tell you, you wouldn’t have listened and even if you did you wouldn’t’ve understood.” When Satsuki opened her mouth to protest, Rei snapped, “You wouldn’t’ve, don’t lie. So, I thought, ‘if I make her hurt, snap her out of her complacency, then she’ll be receptive to it’. But even that wasn’t enough for you to learn. And I guess you never will.”

“I see, so its my fault because I wouldn’t listen to you?” Satsuki shot back. Now that she didn’t have to plead for her life, her pride rebelled at the idea that she was supposed to have a reasonable discussion with this little lunatic. The adrenaline was still cooling, and with it came the

realization that she had *begged* for her life. She'd never even dreamed of doing it before, she should be ashamed. She *was* ashamed, but at the same time, how could she be? It was confusing and uncomfortable and all she wanted was for Rei to just go, leave her and Ryuko to unpack that. "And what about in Dandong? Was it not you who couldn't have a civil conversation with me for even a minute? I was hoping that we could eventually patch this up, but you showed your true colors today."

"No, that's not it! You parrot the words back, you know all the intellectual principles, but actually acting on it? In your life? It's ingrained in your head, don't you see? You were brought up in this?"

"Oh and what, you weren't?"

"Well I-," Rei started, and then stopped herself.

"Yeah. So, what's your secret?"

"It's not the same! I just carried out orders!" Rei protested. Satsuki looked at her pointedly though, and Rei thought, *Of course, the only things Satsuki did that weren't orders were literal subterfuge so what does that mean.* "And besides, I'm the one who got sent to live in a tiny mountain town in the alps and do nothing but talk to a psychotherapist every day for a year," She said with a note of pride.

"Hmm. I'd say they didn't do -," Satsuki stopped herself before she finished by saying "*A very good job.*" Ryuko could see where she was going with that and didn't look pleased. And besides, it just wasn't true. Rei's problem wasn't that she was still brainwashed by Ragyo's conditioning, if anything it was that she'd gone too far in her effort to escape it. "So, you'd recommend the experience."

"Well, I don't know about that but... actually, yes," She concluded.

"I see," Satsuki said as if that was all she needed to know. Almost a full minute later she said, "Some people – Nonon – have said I should see a therapist."

"You should," Rei said, "You both should. You're sick." She herself seemed shocked how forcefully those words came out, "You yourself told me, Ryuko, that it was a disease."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ryuko said with a smug smile. Rei was complete taken aback as Ryuko went on.

"Wha – no! You said that, you know you did!"

Ryuko chuckled, "Yeah, alright, I did say that. But that doesn't matter. 'Cuz maybe you're right, we do have our issues. But *us*? Isn't one of them. And you're gonna have to learn to deal with that."

"I have. *You're* the ones who feel like they have to keep defending themselves, wonder why?"

"Rei, c'mon man..." Ryuko groaned, thinking *She's gotta be aware how much of a lie that is, right?* Rei obviously believed in all that political mumbo jumbo, but Ryuko had learned plenty about political assassinations from Ragyo's memories. And the people who did them rarely



acted alone (Well, unless they *were* Ragyo). And they definitely never decided to do one, spur-of-the-moment, after spending half the day in reasonably calm conversation with their target. No, this was a crime of passion, and she needed any more proof she could just look at how Furashada was hunched intently next to her. *This is gonna be a long night.* “Alright, I think that’s progress. You girls hungry?”

Progress or not, Satsuki and Rei were still reticent to talk. “C’mon now, I’m not gonna call until you say you’re hungry.”

They looked at each other sullenly, as if to say, “*I can’t believe she’s really doing this.*” And “*Right? What a pain this idiot is.*”

“I’m hungry, Ryuko.”

“Please, call the kitchen.”

~~~~~

When the food arrived Ryuko dragged their seats around to either side of the desk so they could eat facing each other and unbound their hands to let them eat. Satsuki sat in her usual spot, facing the balconies, with a whole array of food spread out before her. It had started as just some smoked salmon, but that quickly became no, I want mari sushi and smoked mackerel with eel sauce, oh, and soup, and for good measure some fried rice too. Rei had ordered, as per Ryuko’s suggestion, some of the sweet Takoyaki she was much more enamored with than the typical, savory kind. The dumplings were piled to such heights that that it seemed impossible that she would eat them all, but if she managed it, she’d also ordered a slice of cake and a fruit cup for dessert.

The day’s events had left them both starving, but more importantly looking for something that could comfort and console them. Food would do. If Ryuko had been worried that giving them what they wanted would remove some of her bargaining power, she was mistaken. Almost the moment dinner arrived they seemed to soften. *It’s only human, I suppose,* Ryuko thought as she munched on some tidbits (she wasn’t hungry, but the food smelled good and it gave her something to do).

“You’ve got some sauce on your...” Satsuki said, pointing on herself with her chopstick rather than try to describe the exact part of Rei’s cheek she meant.

“Oh. Um, thank you.”

Satsuki nodded, and then said, “You eat like a slob.”

Both Ryuko and Rei looked rather awkward, frozen mid-chew with wide eyes. Satsuki’s face went red, and she rubbed the arch of her nose as she said, “I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from. It was unbecoming.”

“... ‘s okay,” Rei murmured.

They continued eating in silence until Satsuki said, “You eat like a Mankanshoku. That’s what I should have said the first time.”

“Pffft-heeheehee,” Ryuko put a hand over her mouth and her cheeks puffed out a bit as she tried to stifle an uncomfortably loud laugh. And Rei, in spite of herself, chuckled too.

~~~~~

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re entirely wrong either,” Satsuki said as they were near to finishing their food (Rei had given up on eating the rest of her Takoyaki and Ryuko was finishing them while she worked on her desserts). “Not about what you did today, obviously, but about your point. What kind of influence I’ve been on Ryuko.”

“Yeah?”

“Though, not for the reasons you think. I should have told Ryuko to reconsider what she was doing this morning. I should have told her not to give money away for things outside her jurisdiction. Hell, maybe I should’ve even stopped her from going to Australia after her coronation, I don’t know. I have the knowledge and experience, I should’ve been more actively advising you, Ryuko.”

“Oh, okay,” Rei rolled her eyes sarcastically. Satsuki looked crestfallen. After everything Rei still didn’t believe her.

“Wait, hold on. I thought you already told her what I did today was my own damn idea, right?”

“I *did*!”

“Please, like you expect me to believe tha-,” Rei began, but almost as soon as she looked at Ryuko doubt went from needling at her mind to consuming it. And she could feel from Furashada that there was no deceit behind it. “You really did it, didn’t you? Why?”

“Why? Decorum!” Ryuko said confidently, “You know what I could’ve done today? I coulda just flown to all those newspapers, busted into their boss’ offices, and demanded they take the article down. And they would’ve agreed, no questions asked. Because that’s my life. I mean, we all deal with it, we’re all famous, but for me it’s *constant*. I try to buy coffee they say ‘no, we can’t take your money’, I get pulled over on my motorcycle they say ‘sorry didn’t know it was you, carry on’, I call the cops and say I ‘arrested’ someone and they come pick them up! Hell, I even hijacked a national news broadcast, and everyone was just like, ‘hmm yes, very good Lady Matoi, it’s an honor’!” She exclaimed, serious tone undercut a little by the extremely unconvincing impression of a man’s voice she pulled.

“Rei I’ve been their queen in all but name since way before I wore this rinky-dink little crown. I just didn’t want to admit it to myself. But now that I’ve gotten used to it I kinda like having an official channel for when I need something, with people who come to me when they need something I can help with. It beats running around the city streets, pounding on thugs and stopping a car wreck here or there. You have no idea how *good* it felt when the people of Australia all, as one, laid down their weapons because I said so. That kind of thing used to scare me, but I’m tired of being scared. Because this is my life. So, when today’s situation came up what did I do? I went through the official channels. I mean be real with me, Rei, which seems more like a tyrant? Which seems more *Ragyo* to you? If I ask a the whole congress to make a new ruling that lets me send out a couple emails and get the whole situation taken care of, or if I bust in there just me and my fists and sort shit out that way,” Ryuko exhaled loudly as she finished her tirade.

“Well... both! What about the option of not doing either of those things? If the people really love you so much, why not trust them not to believe such obvious slander? Why not just wait and see?” Rei demanded

“Because, when it comes to protecting Satsuki, I don’t do wait and see.”

Ryuko could see that Rei was fuming, close to boiling over. *Why would you do that for her then, and not for me?* Was the thought which Ryuko correctly assumed was running through her head. What she couldn’t predict though was the deep, clawing fear that Nonon had been right when she said going over to the other side had changed Ryuko. That she was not longer the naïve girl who hoped against hope that she could live a normal life who Rei had fallen in love with. She was seeing a side of Ryuko, the side that took over when the going got rough, when decisive action was needed, which she’d never had a chance to see. But Satsuki had plenty of experience with it. It was, after all, the Ryuko *she* had fallen in love with.

And to her it was kind of beautiful, to see how plainly Ryuko had thought this all through.

Rei didn’t blurt out the words running through her head, though. Instead she sullenly said, “If that’s so then explain how you left us alone together. Seems like you left an awful lot to chance there.”

“It’s like I said, you didn’t have any choice in the outcome though, did you? I had it all under control since the moment I realized what you’d done.”

“No way,” Rei was skeptical, “there’s no way you could know that Furashada would try to stop me.”

“Yyyes I totally could. And I did,” Ryuko said blithely. “I took the desync gun with me, popped back over a couple times throughout the day. Piece of cake. And that’s the thing that might sound crazy to you, is that jumping out of my skin and into multidimensional space like *seven* times in one day is just... what I do. That’s me, and I can’t deny it anymore. Do you understand?”

“I... no...” Not really an answer to Ryuko’s question, but more of a statement of denial.

“Then let me show you!” Ryuko exclaimed, kicking lightly off the table and into the air. She sailed cleanly out the open balcony doors into the evening air, where she turned a flip to right herself. Hovering there, she let all that power that bulged under her skin out, maybe more than she ever had before. Her wings kept growing in huge pulses, edges filling in with patterns of unbelievable complexity, shimmering and diaphanous. Finally, their edges scraped the lake below as around herself Ryuko had drawn a radial body of pure, living light. Beautiful and terrible, Rei could hardly even look at her, but she tried, eyes tearing up involuntarily, mouth hanging open. For the briefest moment, Ryuko dwarfed the mansion itself.

**“You get it now? This just the tiniest fraction of what I am! And I’m not scared of that anymore!”**

And then it was gone. Ryuko – just the human body in which the rest of her was hidden – was floating still in the evening gloom. The other occupants of the mansion wouldn’t question it, they were used to Ryuko flying in and out.

But it all came crashing down on Rei. If she had been like Ragyo and if Rei in spite of all her deprogramming had been seduced once again in the same way, that would’ve been more painful, but also more comprehensible. This went far beyond what Ragyo had been. What Rei had just glimpsed was the face of something more kamui than human – no, less human than a kamui.

And the simple truth was when she looked at this thing that Ryuko had become she knew she didn't love it. She knew she didn't love Ryuko anymore. So what had it all been for?

She buried her face in her hands and folded up on herself, making a feeble groan. It was like she was deflating. Satsuki looked across the desk at her with a newfound sympathy. When she saw that kind of power from Ryuko she saw something majestic, almost spiritual, but it wasn't hard to see how it could be horrifying too.

"Are you okay?" She asked as Ryuko landed.

Rei looked up at Ryuko, "W-what are you?"

"Ryuko. Same as ever. Except a bit more honest with myself," She shrugged, and the confident and casual way she said it told Rei that was no lie, she was somehow both a thing beyond comprehension and Ryuko. There was no contradiction between those things.

And it also made questions of human incest feel very small, when what she had been Ryuko was certainly not a mere child of the Kiryuin line anymore.

"No, no you're not *my* Ryuko anymore. You've changed."

"Maybe. But I'm still Ryuko. That's somethin' that ain't changing, not in a million years," Ryuko said, and quite literally meant it. Rei could feel that through Furashada. And she could also feel a strange and powerful kinship. Ryuko's aura always brought him comfort, but now it was more. Without wearing him their connection wasn't quite so strong, and he – well, he wasn't speaking to her right now – but that bond seeming to be saying "*Yes, this is me. You really are just like me.*"

"Hey, Furashada..." she said, weakly, but he ignored her, eyes on Ryuko.

Ryuko walked around the desk to her, put a warm hand on her shoulder and smiled, a little wistfully. "And look, that's all there is too it. When I first got sent to the other side, I realized just how short my time on Earth is, and how precious. I was hung in this limbo, waiting to see what you did on one hand, trying to start something with Satsuki on the other. But the thing is, when you're gone, I'm going to leave Earth behind too, to be with Senketsu *out there*. And so, I can't waste a moment in limbo anymore."

"Yeah I... I know..." Rei said, but when she saw that same damn smile, so sweet and caring in spite of everything, memories of a few short months when she was the happiest she could ever remember being (well, most of the time) stung at the corners of her eyes and before she knew it there were tears. "Ah... damn..."

"Rei you're not... afraid of me, are you?" Ryuko suddenly looked concerned.

"No, no it's not that. It's just, it's really over, isn't it? *Us*. There's no going back. I see that now." Ryuko just looked at her sadly. "Damn. Damn damn damn I – I thought I knew that, but... Ryuko it wasn't always great, I know. I – I know you read that interview where I said I couldn't keep up with your partying, that I didn't really like it. But I was okay with that because it's *normal* for couples to have their differences, it felt natural to get along with you *and* to argue too and I – I coulda gone on like that forever. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you and have a family and a home together and now you – *she* – but it was never going to happen, was it?

Sooner or later you were going to wake up to who you really are and what you really wanted and that – and that wasn't *me*."

"Rei..."

"But it was good, wasn't it? Then, you wanted to be with me for the rest of my life too, didn't you?" She took Ryuko's hand, looked up at her with a desperate sadness in her eyes.

And Ryuko couldn't help it, she had to be honest, "Yeah. It was good. At the start, you were just another in a long line of women to help keep my insomnia away, back when I used to just kinda fantasize about Satsuki off and on. But you were so mature, and composed, and smart, and I just felt so *proud* to call you my girlfriend. I wanted for some of that to rub off on me. And I could see how happy I made you, too. It... felt like everything I needed. And when Satsuki told me how she felt I... I dunno, it was just a little kinda naughty thrill now and then, we figured lots of families probably had fucked up little secrets like that. But then you went and found out and... I didn't realize at the time but even when I was waiting like you'd come back it felt hollow. And after that, well, I mean you know what happened then."

"You weren't just using me to cover then? A mask for your real relationship?"

"No, god, never!" Ryuko exclaimed, and Rei didn't need Furashada's aura-sense to tell her that was genuine.

She smiled weakly, "That's nice. And... do you still love me?"

Ryuko smiled again, "Of course I do. How couldn't I? I just... with Satsuki's its more than love. Everything we've been through together. One way or another, we're stuck with each other."

"Oh. Well then, it's okay. Because I'm not sure I love you anymore, Ryuko. Not after I've seen *that*. So, I guess it really is over."

And she started tearing up all over again, just thinking of it. Everything – the karaoke nights, the slow afternoons when they played video games with Ryuko's college friends, the time they had sex in the penthouse hottub. Even the simplest things, like watching Ryuko make coffee for her. It was a bittersweet feeling.

"Rei..." Satsuki started in a gentle tone.

"No, it's alright, just please. Give me a minute to mourn."

## Divine Intervention: 2

### Chapter Summary

There's a lot of fun references to things from Peacetime in this one. See if you can spot them all!

December 2067

~~~~~

When Rei had pulled herself together, Ryuko brought her and Satsuki back to their original knee-to-knee seating position. Night had fallen, and even though Ryuko had closed the balcony doors the draft in the office was brutal. Rei was shaking, and even though Satsuki had enough self-control to sit there stoically Ryuko could sense that the heat radiating off her body was less than it should be.

“Hey, Ryuko?” Rei asked, “Could you let me wear Furashada?”

Ryuko shrugged, “You can communicate with him just fine, right?”

“Please. I’m cold,” Rei insisted.

Of course, Ryuko let her have it. Obviously, Rei was freezing, literally all she was wearing was her underclothes. But the way Ryuko saw it forcing them to drag everything out was good. It encouraged them to be honest, and not obfuscate anything. She said, “Yeah, I think that’s only fair,” and unwound the threads around Rei’s torso and arms enough that Furashada could slither on.

Except he didn’t. He just sat there, leaning against Ryuko, eyes down. *[No. I don’t even want to look at you right now]* he said.

“Furashada!” Rei croaked, like she might begin to cry all over again.

*[At this point I’m just sorry I encouraged this... insanity. The moment you ripped me off I realized that however much I resented Satsuki for taking Ryuko from me, however much I was scared of what she could do or could make Ryuko do, it was just a shadow of what **you** felt. But I couldn’t tell that! I couldn’t tell where my thoughts ended and yours began. I know you didn’t mean to but you **dragged** me into this. I don’t care what Ryuko says, it takes more than a night to forgive and forget that. I need time to think. About our connection.]*

Rei nodded solemnly, “You’re right. When Nonon is about to do something petty, or Uzu something reckless, or Shiro something obsessive, or Aikuro something boorish then Saiban or Seijitsu or Izanami or Nekketsu are there as a voice of reason. Prevent them from acting on their worst impulses. But you couldn’t do that because my impulses have become yours.”

*[No, no it's worse than that. You were torn too, I could tell. Maybe on your own you wouldn't have exploded at Satsuki either. Our ability, it only works if we can trust each other not to do something horrible. I never thought that would be a problem, before today. But now, I'm afraid we encourage each other. And that could be **dangerous**.]*

"But... it's our special ability," Rei murmured sadly. They were both proud of their deep bond, it was what separated them from the other kamui, made them unique. So much better than some eccentric power for combat or perception. No, where the others were two separate people with a crude psychic link, they were truly two sides of the same coin. They'd always looked at that as something magical, a blessing, a gift from beyond meant only for them. Realizing that it could be a curse too was a raw feeling, a betrayal but worse because the culprit was in there in the back of their minds. They didn't so much need time to think as they needed to go back to before they learned this.

Satsuki and Ryuko shared a look, silent but meaningful.

And Satsuki said, "Rei, Furashada, your special ability is that, where other kamui have a form of telepathic speech with their wearers you are able to more directly share your thoughts, is that right?"

Furashada couldn't answer, so Rei did, "Uh, yes. We can do the talking thing too."

"Ah, I see. Then, you can only share thoughts while wearing Furashada?"

"That is correct," Rei answered stiffly.

"Well, and I don't mean to overstep, but have you considered a confidant?" Satsuki asked in her most soft and polite voice.

Rei looked more confused than anything, "Confidant? No?"

"When I find myself questioning my judgement or about to do something extreme, I discuss it with someone. Nonon, Shiro, they know me well and aren't afraid to tell me if I disagree. Although admittedly I mostly use them as a sounding board for ideas, from time to time they have talked sense into me too."

"Well there's your problem. Nonon and Shiro?" Rei went on, "I mean come on, you know them. Nonon's got a great mind for military and logistics, but that's how she looks at everything."

"Like one big marching band," Satsuki admitted, smiling fondly. "And then Shiro is... well, Shiro."

"Agnostic on the concept of ethics, you mean," Rei said.

Satsuki hum-chuckled, "Hmmhmm, well that may be so."

"Yeah. So you see how maybe when it comes to curbing *your* worst impulses they're maybe some of the worst people you could pick."

Satsuki frowned, "For a time I did have you."

"Yeah, well..." Rei said, leaving the obvious "*You can hardly blame me for that.*"

“No, but really we were good together. When you were first back, working as my aide, we worked quite well together,” Satsuki said, “That was – roughly – what I had in mind when I first invited you to come with us. And I enjoyed it.”

“And so what, you’re saying that Furashada and I should take you as our confidant then? That we should’ve come discussed it with you first before trying to blackmail you?” Rei replied acerbically.

“Well... yes. That is what Ryuko wants to come out of tonight. The only real question is if we’re going to start working on that now or if we really are gonna sit here all night.”

“Uh, to be clear, I don’t want you two to just be like giving each other work advice or whatever. You *are* leaving here as friends,” Ryuko said.

“We have to start somewhere,” Satsuki said, pleading with her eyes for Ryuko to just work with her here.

Rei made a frustrated grumble. Ryuko had to know this was the stupidest idea yet. She and Satsuki had no illusions, neither of them wanted anything to do with the other, but here they were forced to try and appease her. True though that might be, now all she wanted to do was show Satsuki just how pithy and useless that comment was. How could she help them with their situation, she didn’t know the first thing about it! Actually, that was a good point, so Rei said, “Alright then, if you want to be my ‘confidant’, then what should we do about or thought-link? Why don’t you start there?”

Satsuki thought for a moment and said, “Furashada, I know I don’t have full knowledge of the situation and that I can’t hear you, but I think you should go with Rei. It... might be hard for you to forgive her or feel safe around her when she can influence your thoughts and make you do things you don’t want. But you want to forgive her, don’t you? You don’t really believe she’d ever *abuse* that ability, do you? No, she wouldn’t, and that’s coming from *me*.”

*[She still doesn’t quite get it,]* Furashada said to Rei. *[But she has a point.]*

And Rei said, “The trouble is more than that, I don’t just influence him, he does right back. It’s hard to tell our thoughts apart at all, so when we’re both on the same page we drive each other further on. Twice the energy, twice the attention span, twice the trains of thought, twice the focus. Do you understand?”

“Perhaps not. It’s hard for me to grasp then, quite how are you distinct people at all?”

Rei shrugged, “We just are. It’s not something we’ve ever had to define. You see then just how unequi-,”

“-Until today,” Satsuki interrupted, “You never needed to define it until today.”

“Well... yeah. We were on the same page right up until I snapped at you, and sort of egged each other on,” Rei admitted

“And naturally you told nobody else about this. How do you suppose Aoi would have reacted if you told her about this, I wonder? Or Nonon for that matter?”

“They’d have called me crazy, of course.”



“And yet they’re your best friends, so far as I know. Believe me, Shiro has called me crazy on numerous occasions. Sometimes I carried on anyway. But I always heard him out. And what about Haruka? You’d consider her your friend too, right? Did she approve when you told her.”

Rei smiled morosely, “No, of course not. I had to offer her something of her own to get her to go along at all. She never mentioned it, but I do wonder if she thought I was doing it out of jealousy.”

“See? And if you had someone like one of them to help you with that aspect, perhaps you would have been inclined to approach your political concerns more directly,” Satsuki said, feeling like maybe they were getting somewhere. But Rei’s eyes turned scornful with a look that said, “*Yeah, right*”. And Satsuki continued hesitantly, “Oh... But I suppose in truth all of that is immaterial. I want you to get someone you can rely on, because if you don’t feel safe or... right together, that’s unacceptable. I may never have had a kamui, but I think by now I’m more than familiar with them. Rei, Furashada, you need each other. Trying to get along in the world without each other...” She glanced at Ryuko.

“It’s hard,” Ryuko sighed, “It’s really, really hard. You can’t sleep, everything feels dull, you feel this *constant* need to distract yourself from how there’s something missing, it’s... y’know, it’s *hard*.”

“And I don’t even need to know that to know that a kamui and their wearer being apart, even for a day, it feels *wrong*,” Satsuki nodded, “It scares me, so my question is how much more scared are you right now?”

“Well,” Rei’s response was choked. *Scared?*

“What you did today was irrational, I think you know that. But that’s only human. Even the smartest people I know do irrational things all the time. I think this might sound stupid, I’m having trouble with the words, but do you know what else is human? We need each other for comfort. Right now, I think the scariest thing to both of you is that you might never be able to figure it out, to be the way you were again. You have to prove to each other that that isn’t true,” Satsuki concluded. She knew there was an idea in there, what they needed to hear. Had she gotten it close enough?

Evidently not, “But that’s just the thing. The moment I put Furashada on, it will feel right and natural again and we won’t know if we can stop ourselves next time one of us decides to do the wrong thing.”

“Then don’t wear him. But Furashada, go to her anyway. You haven’t been around us for very long, but when we humans are having it rough, we like to huddle together. Most animals do. It’s a big, cold universe for a human on their own, and we evolved this instinct at a time when the world was even colder. If I were in her shoes, I think just holding you would be enough for now.”

Nobody said anything for a moment. Furashada’s eyes looked distant, as much as a kamui’s could. Finally, he shuffled up and pushed himself off the edge of the desk with his sleeves, landing on Rei’s lap. She gasped and flung her arms around him. Satsuki was right. This felt *right*.

*[You really are cold,]* he said, *[Look how you’re shivering.]*

“No, no I’m fine now,” Rei sniffed into his collars.

“Ah hell,” Ryuko stood up. It was so like her and Senketsu, after their battle with Tsumugu. It hurt to think how purely glad she was to get him back; how defiant she was in the face of anyone taking him. And she barely even knew him then. Rei and Furashada had a whole year of memories together. “You ain’t gonna keep warm that way,” She said. “I’ll go get a spare blanket from the closet, hang on.”

And she drifted over to the stairs leading up to her bedroom.

“Well, um, despite all appearances I doubt she’s really left us alone. The threads are still rather tight,” Satsuki said, and to her surprise the glowing fibers restraining her relaxed, just slightly. She smiled, “Thank you dear.”

“Satsuki?” Rei asked.

“Hmm?”

“We’re going to make it work. I mean, we’ll find a way to move past this. We’ll get someone who we can talk to, make sure we’re okay. Until we can trust ourselves again,” She said, voice ragged but certain.

“Good,” Satsuki nodded, “... for the time being though, it would seem you just have me.”

~~~~~

And, well, what else could they do but talk?

“Y’know, it’s funny,” Rei said, wrapped up tight in a thick navy blue comforter, Furashada barely peaking over below her head, “I’ve known you almost as long as I can remember, and yet I’m trying and I can’t think of a single good memory I had with you while we were growing up.”

“Hmm, well to me that isn’t exactly surprising,” Satsuki said (Ryuko had been thoughtful enough to bring her a blanket too), “I don’t have many good memories of that time. And the only thing that made you happy was praise from Ragyo. But it is rather sad.”

“You’d think there’d be at least one,” Rei agreed, “We were kids then. Kids with hard little hearts.”

“There was a while when I was quite young that we were permitted to train together, you remember that? Run the obstacle courses, spar...” Satsuki reminisced.

“Yeah, and I’m probably responsible for more than my fair share of those scars on your back.”

Satsuki wasn’t upset by that, “Well don’t feel bad. They pushed you hard. And it only made me stronger. Oh, but there was one time, do you remember when Nui torched that one yacht in one of her tantrums and got herself locked in the basement for a week as punishment. I remember thinking one time when you came back upstairs that you looked as happy with the situation as I felt.”

“Oho yes,” Rei chuckled, “You don’t want to know what Ragyo did to her, but honestly I think the boredom got to her worse than the torture.”

“Typical. But you see, we have one good memory in parallel. Does that count?” Satsuki asked.

“I think it’s close enough.”

“Hmhmhm. It was a nice moment for me too because I always *suspected* that you loathed Nui, but I never had any proof. You did, right?”

“Oh, definitely. I mean, you can imagine how I was *so* jealous of how much attention she got,” Rei shook her head at her former stupidity. “*Anything* she wanted, and she wanted the stupidest things. And so, so annoying, all the time. I felt invisible whenever she was in the room. And that thing she could do wherever she’d-,”

“- appear almost out of nowhere from places she couldn’t possibly have gotten to? Yeah, that one on its own was a solid... third of the reason I didn’t stay in Ragyo’s manner often,” Satsuki chuckled. “Well, that’s nice. Like I said I always figured you didn’t like her, you had a brain after all.”

“The one thing I always had on her, which I think you figured out too, was that if you didn’t rise to her bait it burned at her. Yeah, you know what I mean,” Rei smiled a thin, spiteful smile at the memory, “But even so, there was always a sort of... I don’t know...”

“... Fascination?”

Rei nodded vigorously, “Well, she was a religious figure! To certain sects her lifestyle, such as it was, was considered exemplary. Just how purely hedonistic she was. But even besides – ach! Why’m I even telling you this?” She cut herself off, looking down at Furashada in red-checked frustration.

Satsuki nodded slowly and thoughtfully. “I know. She played an outsize role in, well, in my discovery of my sexuality.”

Rei’s eyes slowly widened with realization of what she’d just been told. It was like a yawning chasm of old dread, a sudden pity in her chest for Satsuki. “I... I heard about that. That was-,”

“-The details,” Satsuki cut her off, as though to take back that revelation, “The details I have not even shared with Ryuko. Though as she can access Ragyo’s memories she’s probably aware. It was a moment of weakness that nearly ruined everything but wound up amounting to nothing more than years of sexual harassment.”

Rei was shocked, to say nothing else. “Well I... um... okay I won’t pry. Wow. So, then you do know what I meant.” She didn’t really have anything else to say. Eventually she thought of something though, “You know, I was never jealous of you though. Yeah, it’s true. And I was the right age to get some of that ‘older sibling rivalry’ too. But I dunno, from what I remember she... actually got a lot nicer to me right around the time you were born.”

Ryuko nodded, “Yeah, that tracks.”

“Yeah and then after that I sort of convinced myself I was superior because you just got sent out to police the domain and I got to stay close to the real power. Because of course I did.”

“Well, I um – since we’re all about telling secrets we never planned on revealing to anyone, I’ve got something. We – and by we, I mean the original conspirators, just myself and Shiro – seriously considered recruiting you to our cause. I mean, with you as close to Ragyo as you were, the risk of being found out was great but you could’ve done *so* much. Shiro thought it was too great a risk, but in the end the call was mine and I... decided not to go through with it.”

“You did,” Rei processed that. “That was the right thing. By the time you were old enough to even consider it, I was too deep into it. It would’ve been disaster. So don’t worry about it.”

“Well I do wish we could’ve,” Satsuki sighed. “If we could’ve got you out sooner... who knows how things might’ve gone. But, in spite of all that, I am glad we managed it eventually.” Rei looked skeptical, and Satsuki laughed in response, “Yes, yes even after today.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I mean this... girlfriend problems, you turned out to be a psycho about this. But that doesn’t change that you’re someone who ought to live. So no, I’m still very glad we got you out and now that my life isn’t in immediate peril, I don’t plan on changing that.”

Something about the very specific way that Satsuki qualified that almost made Rei burst out laughing, it was just so eminently *Satsuki*. As it was, she smirked and said, “Yeah well, you haven’t seen me try and make you.”

Satsuki laughed. And it was like a dam broke.

~~~~~

And of course, it was. They were so alike, Ryuko knew they just needed time and a little shove. And now she just had to sit there and watch and try not to grin too big. The hours were suddenly breezing by as they talked about books, movies, history, politics. Even themselves.

“No, I mean I just felt so weird, I so *definitely* get it,” Satsuki was saying quickly, “I mean, did you really expect I had any better luck? In fact, I have to reconsider my previous statement about you having a brain – you really expected me to provide *dating* advice?”

“No! Noho no, no,” Rei laughed as she tried to explain, “I just meant more like, uh, commiseration! I mean we both ended up with this... weirdo, there’s gotta be some common thread.”

“That I don’t doubt. Well how’s this; that one time I was talking about? With the disguise, and that bar, er, what’s its name?”

“*Typhoon Mary’s*,” Ryuko answered.

“Right, yeah. I mean, everything about it felt weird. Ryuko goes to introduce me to one or another of her friends, and I just can’t think of anything to say! And you know me-,”

“- You can talk your way out of your own execution, I’m well aware,” Rei joked.

“Hmhmhm, quite. I mean, it was just everything about it. I saw them sizing me up, and I tried to think of how they saw me. Like, there was this one woman, first person I talked to there actually, and she comes up to me! And I’m not used to that, people coming up to me, and immediately I’m thinking ‘Is she a spy?’”

“Pfft! A spy?”

“Well, I mean, just for a second. But then I find myself wondering what it is that drew her to me. Was it just that I came in with Ryuko? Did I look vulnerable? And I think I figured it out. I looked like a nerdy college girl new in the big city who’d just realized she was a lesbian last week and was scared out of her wits just sitting there, already debating if she should leave.”

“But you were scared out of your wits.”

“I was! And I realized that’s *basically* what I was too. That’s how I looked to all of them, and it’s really surreal because on the one hand they didn’t know me at all and on the other, if you think about it, in the moment they knew me quite well because that’s who I was right then. I mean that’s how I *felt*! Complete fish out of water.”

“Now *that* I can empathize with. We’re women of culture! The rat race of modern life is too much trouble sometimes.”

“You know what I liked? That one anime movie, with the two archaeologists who have a fling while excavating this ancient city and then meet back up years later at a convention? Came out in twenty-fourty... five, right? *That’s* what it should be like.”

“Yeah, “*City of Gold and Tears*”. Classic,” Rei nodded.

“This one fell asleep during it,” Satsuki gestured to Ryuko, rolling her eyes.

Rei gasped, “Ryuko!”

“I’m an uncultured savage, what can I say? I thought it was sweet,” Ryuko shrugged.

“Sweet. An epic story of heartache and lost love?” Satsuki scoffed, halfway between beaming and scowling.

“It’s a sweeping romance! A commentary on coming out a-and the human condition in general!” Rei added. “What do I expect, it’s wasted on you. Ahh, but seriously, I love that movie but hope that you’re at least partially joking, because it does present a very romanticized view of... well, uh, romance.” Though, perhaps Rei did understand now just how Satsuki’s attraction Ryuko worked. It did feel like a fitting end to the story they had together. And now that she knew she didn’t want any part of that story, well, maybe it wasn’t the worst she’d ever heard.

“No, I know, it does. And I am mostly joking but I do sometimes wish it could be like that.”

“Yeah, yeah, me too. Who doesn’t? Were you afraid of being rejected, by the way?”

“Not particularly I think but, well, actually yes. Same as everything else really, I didn’t like the idea of being rejected but I was much more scared of what came after if they *didn’t* reject me.”

“See, that was the one thing that really held me back before I met Ryuko,” Rei said, “How the hell could I get around being who I was. I think it’d be different now that I have done some good of my own, Furashada and I that is, but back then how could I introduce myself to someone as Rei Hououmarua and *not* have them spit in my face?”

“Well, at least then you’d know it was because of that, and not something else like how you looked, what you said, what kind of impression you made. Because I wasn’t going by my own name that night, and I’m just now thinking that if one of them had *still* turned me down – god, what a blow!” Satsuki exclaimed. “But that won’t happen to you now. I mean, you got Ryuko without being a famous kamui wearer. I think you’ll do fine.”

Rei, despite herself, blushed, “Well, you’re just saying that to make nice.”

“As a matter of fact, I was actually rather torn up for quite a while because I was convinced you were *way* more Ryuko’s type than I.”

“You must be kidding,” Rei’s voice dropped in shock. She should’ve been mad about the implications of that (like just how long Satsuki had her eyes on Ryuko), but after everything they’d shared tonight, they were *long* past that point.

“You, Haruka, Mako... I don’t exactly fit the mold, do I?”

“Ha-hahahaha! Jesus, get you talking and you’re just a bundle of insecurities, aren’t you? Never would’ve thought,” Rei laughed.

“Well, I dunno if I’d go *that* far,” Satsuki said with a sheepish smile. “My point being, I think you’ll do fine.”

Rei sighed, “God, I’m thinking right now I’ll take a long break from this. I just can’t get involved in the... messiness of it now. It bugs me too, that now I’ll never know if someone’s into me just because I’m famous or because I’m *me*. Ryuko, how did you do it? You’re more famous than every one of us.”

“Geez, I mean, lots of people are awful about it in every way. But I try to be charitable to all of them. Give everyone the benefit of the doubt, see if they prove to be chill or not,” Ryuko shrugged.

Satsuki made a short barking laugh, “Well, I see that works well. After all, it’s not like Haruka thought that you were a literal angel or anything while you were dating.”

“Yeah, not to mention all the people you’re giving the benefit of the doubt to are college kids. Yeah, I bet they’re pretty *chill* and all after you’ve hit the gravity bong a couple times,” Rei added.

A broad grin spread across Ryuko’s face, “Hah!”

“Huh?”

“You did it!” In a flash, she flicked her fingers and all the threads around Satsuki and Rei unlashd themselves and flew back into her. Stunned, they both rubbed their sore arms and stretched. “You’re friends now.” They both frowned at that.

“Fuck you Ryuko,” Rei said, in a not at all unfriendly tone.

“Yeah. What a waste of my goddamn time this has been,” Satsuki agreed, but she couldn’t go long before she chuckled instead. What morons they all were. She and Rei, under other circumstances, should have always been friends. She couldn’t help but fear that the next time she saw Rei, the spell would be broken, and it would be as if tonight had never happened. *But at least I can live up to my end of it. I can maintain the spell on my end, and if she’s anything like me – and she is – she’ll do the same.*

“This is like, some new form of Stockholm syndrome you’ve invented,” Rei said, “Only it’s between the two prisoners, not the prisoner and jailer.”

“So you admit you’re friends?” Ryuko, unimpressed, “C’mon, don’t be like me and Nonon. Be straight up. You forgive each other?”

“I... suppose I can put it behind me,” Satsuki concluded.

“Honestly? I don’t know that forgiveness even matters with us. I know it’s through for us, Ryuko, I don’t want to take her place. And after tonight, frankly I just don’t believe Satsuki’s been the influence on you I was scared she was. If we’re the only one who knows what it was like to grow up how we did, I think... oh, I don’t know. I think that means something.”

Ryuko beamed, kicking her legs excitedly below the desk. “Wowww. Wow wow!” She jumped off the desk and quickly scooped them both up in a tight hug. “I gotta say, I knew it work but I never expected it would work on the first try!”

“First... try?”

“Well, I kinda expected one of ya to fall asleep in your chair and we’d have to keep on going tomorrow,” Ryuko answered as they disconnected from the hug. “But I shoulda known better. I mean, you’re both smarter than me, I should’ve known you’d figure out what to do.” She turned to Rei, who now stood holding Furashada, and said, “You go find the nearest guest bedroom, okay? There’s people who work here who’ll take of everything for you. And remember, be completely up front with everyone in our circle about what happened tonight.”

Rei, be still Ryuko’s heart, actually looked disappointed. “Oh, uh, sure. I did have a story I wanted to mention from before I met you. At one point I had tried to make a profile on a dating website. But I’m sure you’re exhausted, and I will be too in a moment.”

“You... hold on a minute. And this is a real story?” Satsuki asked, containing her amusement

“It was a *nightmare*.”

“... Okay Ryuko you can sleep if you want but I want to hear this one.”

And when Ryuko realized that it was true, they weren’t just friendly but actually wanted to spend more time around each other, she nearly squealed. A year and change on and she’d *finally* fixed the mess she made. She could barely contain herself from zipping off into the sky. Lift mountains, fly faster than a rocket, take on the world’s most skilled warriors and win, she already knew she could do these things. But to take two implacable enemies and make them friends in a

single night? *I hope they tell stories about this one. If they're gonna make legends out of me, at least let it be the things that I didn't even think I could do.*

“Ohohoho, Senketsu is gonna have a fit when I tell him this worked!”

~~~~~

It was much, much later in the night that Rei finally got truly tired and decided to turn in. And now they weren't sitting in an awkward triangle at Satsuki's desk but spread out in lawnchairs on the balcony, wrapped in multiple blankets. Satsuki had her tea, Rei a decaf coffee (vanilla and hazelnut), and Ryuko coffee too, though hers had Irish whiskey and whipped cream instead.

Rei stood, Furashada on her shoulders, blanket around her like a cloak. “Well... I guess this is it. Thank you both, I mean it. I don't deserve this second chance.”

“Fuck deserve. It's what had to happen,” Ryuko declared.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” Satsuki said, “We're gonna get to workin' on that idea of yours. I'm *sure* our supercomputer friends can pull every record from the Soviet Union, E.U., and United States. Process 'em all. Find out what works, what doesn't. What we can incorporate into the League. I suspect you're right about the broad strokes; Soviets too centrally planned, E.U. too loose, U.S. too reliant on unregulated markets which we can't do plus far more culturally homogeneous. Still, it's bound to contain surprises.”

“Yeah, that sounds fun.”

“Er, just to be clear, that doesn't change that you're still upset with some moves I've made, right?” Ryuko asked.

Rei frowned, “Yeah. You need to-,”

“-Don't *worry*,” Satsuki said, giving Ryuko a little mock punch to the cheek. “She sets a foot wrong I'm on her like a *hawk*.”

Rei laughed, “Okay, okay. I believe you now, I don't need further persuasion.”

“But hey,” Ryuko said, sitting up, “I don't wanna have you coming complaining about screwups I already made. I'mmm thinking... what I want to do is have some kinda committee, official group with a representative from every country in the League that's big-picture for all kinds of international stuff. And you'd be the Japan rep. That way, you're never out of the loop and you can do all your big plans, right?”

“Well that's... yeah, we could do something like that. But I don't think I'm ready for that yet. I think I'm doing good work on the ground, from the front lines right now. Plus it's more fun. *Plus* I'm gonna insist I have to be elected to this office rather than appointed,” Rei answered.

“Fair enough,” Ryuko answered. “I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow, alright? I'm gettin' pancakes but you can order whatever the hell you like!” She yelled as Rei exited the balcony and was gone. Once she was gone, Ryuko sighed a big sigh of relief and seemed to sink into her chair. Satsuki, meanwhile, got up and laid down right besides, throwing her blankets over both of them.



Even though Ryuko had no blankets, her body still burned warm like a furnace. “Man, what a day,” Ryuko groaned.

“Ryuko. You have *no* idea.”

“Phahaha yeah, yeah maybe I don’t. You still mad at me, sweetie?”

“Oh incandescently,” Satsuki said, and when Ryuko looked perplexed because she didn’t know the word she instead said, “Not really, no.”

Ryuko grinned, nuzzling up to Satsuki until their noses touched “Sats, you know I’m amazed. I’m so amazed. That with Furashada was just *inspired*. Why’d you decide to work with me?”

“Because I decided I wanted to be friends with Rei. I always wanted to make amends. And they needed someone to help them,” Satsuki smiled.

“That’s sweet. And Rei was sweet too. I knew she would be,” Ryuko said. “You’re both too upstanding.”

“Mmm. Hey, can I try some of your coffee?” Satsuki asked.

“Er, sure,” Ryuko said, passing the mug over. Satsuki took a sip and immediately screwed her face up.

“Euch! What’s the matter with it?” Satsuki exclaimed.

Ryuko took the mug back and sipped happily, “Well, it’s Irish Coffee.”

“Well then what’s wrong with the Irish?”

“Well, they’re alcoholics,” Ryuko answered, laughing to herself at her own wit. Satsuki didn’t quite understand that, and when Ryuko explained, “It’s a drink, as in a mixed drink. You get the drift?” Her eyes lit up.

“Get me one of those,” She said, “I could *really* use something like that.”

So Ryuko got on her phone and in no time at all a pot of fresh decaf coffee, a bottle of Irish whiskey, and a whipped cream bottle were delivered to them and they were well into their second mugs.

“Hey Sats, hey,” Ryuko whispered, “Ya ever do a whippit?”

Satsuki didn’t answer, but instead chuckled to herself. “What’s up?” Ryuko asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking, how this today was me on the other side of my old Honnouji game. I learned what it was like for you when I was jerking you around there,” Satsuki answered.

“Oh yeah? And how’d you like it.”

“Terrible. Never again. But I learned something else too,” Satsuki said.

“Hmm?”

“Well, just at the moment when Rei really looked, she was going to kill me, I wanted to live more than I *ever* have. And now that I’m through that it feels... kind of good, actually. She breathed some fresh life into me, somehow. If I’d’ve known how things were going to turn out, I would almost be glad it happened,” Satsuki said in a quiet, low tone, reaching in deep for the words.

Ryuko didn’t have to say anything to that for Satsuki to know it lit her heart up. “Hey, you know I learned a lot about you too tonight. Miss, ‘not my type’,” Ryuko said as she leaned forward to messily kiss Satsuki’s neck.

Satsuki giggled ticklishly, “Now, now I only *used* to think that.”

“Oh yeah?” Ryuko asked as she dragged her fingers down to Satsuki’s blouse and began to laboriously unbutton.

*Now this is more like it. Picking up where we left off.*

“Why don’t you tell me then, what do you think now?” Ryuko breathed.

“Well, I know you can’t get enough of *these*,” Satsuki guided Ryuko’s hands down to her breasts, “Or these,” Then down to her abs, “Or-,”

Ryuko was faster than her, dipping her hand under Satsuki’s dress, “This?”

The moment their eyes met, hazing over with lust and liquor, it was all a flurry to undress, blankets twisting around their legs, Ryuko’s life-fiber clothing vanishing into her until suddenly they were skin to skin.

“A-ahh! Ryuko I-I didn’t mean – *here*?”

“Shh, shhshh. C’mon Sats. Let me make it up to you for all this shit.”

And they were right back where they’d been that morning. Ryuko’s head between Satsuki’s legs, fingers intertwined, hearts racing.

“Not my type my ass,” Ryuko said, “See? Perfect fit.”

“Jesus-christ Ryuko!” Satsuki gasped.

“Ah damn. Too corny?”

In response, Satsuki put a hand on her head and forced her back down. “No no no, that was – you’re - Oh, just shut up already.”

~~~~~

At about the same time, Nonon was laying awake in bed in Dandong. Her feet were freezing. The bed was much too large, and all her precious body heat was being sucked away.

But she was almost on the edge of sleep and loathe to get up and get socks, so instead she typed a text to Uzu.

*\*hey\*\*read your interveiw with Haruka\*\*pretty neat I think\**

A minute later the response came back.

*\*Yeah, funny thing about that\**

*\*wuzzat mean\**

*\*Okay, you're never going to believe this\*\*So, Rei almost murdered Satsuki today\**

*\*WTF\*\*WTFWTFWTFWTFWTF\**

*\*And now Ryuko I think promoted her so she outranks all of us\**

*\*ok im calling you right now\**

# Not Quite Peace but Close Enough

## Chapter Summary

Bit of a fun, bantery chapter for me. Very tough balance of trying to get everyone acting within their canon character while also showing recent development and also just having them messing around and in high spirits. I like it, I hope it lands.

December 2067

~~~~~

No matter how hard she tried Ryuko couldn't sit still. She was filled with nervous energy that compelled her to go fiddle with the floral arrangements on the table, or straighten a rug, or smooth out a curtain, or try to tidy up any odd object that caught her eye. Only a few more tortuously long hours to go until everyone arrived, and she wanted everything to be spotless.

Of course, when everyone in this case meant the family it wasn't like anyone had high expectations. Except Ryuko. She was hosting the holidays for the first time, and that meant something. Especially considering how on a typical Christmas or New Years in her father's mansion she had nothing but cold, empty halls to look forward to. Until living with the Mankanshoku's Ryuko had the suspicion that real people didn't celebrate the holidays like they did on TV.

As she paced around pretending like there was a point to what she was doing Satsuki watched from her favorite armchair in the main lounge. She closed her book and said, "Ryuko dear, you might wait out the afternoon more comfortably in the sports complex, rather than trying to clean an already clean room. I can assure you; the staff did not overlook anything."

"Oh! Sorry, sorry, I'll stop."

"No, it's for your sake not mine, in fact I find your frantic activity rather charming. It reminds me that you're still not accustomed to this *obscene* level of wealth we possess," Satsuki said, enunciating each word as though teaching to a class.

Ryuko smiled, stopped pacing, "Is that what it shows?"

"Yes. I think about it a lot, actually," Satsuki said, "Here, sit." She slid over just enough for Ryuko to drop down next to her, which she did happily and while throwing an arm around Satsuki's shoulders, "I don't know if you even notice, but you do little things quite often. You'll offer the services of our kitchen staff to any and every guest, but when you feel like eating you go down there and startle the hell out of them trying to make a grilled cheese sandwich. And you always lock the doors at night even though we have security cameras, guards, and your own supersenses. And I've seen you go out of your way to get a free pen from a fundraising booth at the mall, even though you certainly don't need it."

“Y’know I do have a lot of shitty ballpoints in my pen drawer,” Ryuko said thoughtfully.

“And then today, the way I see it, your instinct is to clean because company is coming, even though we pay people to do it instead. Pay them quite a lot, actually. See what I mean? Your way of thinking assumes that there’s scarcity, and danger, and a need to do things yourself. People who’ve been rich, extravagantly so, all their lives don’t act like that,” Satsuki shook her head, “It’s hard to resist this urge to become *spineless*, even I have to catch myself from time to time.”

Ryuko laughed to herself and said, “Actually, I do catch myself doing that stuff sometimes. Especially the kitchen thing, because I think ‘eh I don’t want to bother them’ and then go down there and there are like dozens of chefs waiting for something to do. It’s kind of like this: when I was living at the penthouse, I got used to having meetings with all my roomies where we’d whine about someone not doing the dishes or some shit. Here, there’s too many people to know what everyone’s doing all the time. Sometimes I do kinda get it in my head that our private rooms and maybe this lounge which the gang seems to like – over, like, the other three – are the only parts of this place that’re really my house. I feel like I... own a hotel or something.”

“Hmhmhm, not much of an addition to the rest of your resume.”

“Right? Sometimes I get a chuckle thinking about how I’d introduce myself. Somethin’ like, ‘Hi I’m Ryuko, I’m an immortal hybrid who can see through time, I saved the world that one time and so they made me queen, I create kamui that could wreck cities if they wanted, oh and also I run a hotel up in West Tochigi,’” She laughed picturing how dumbfounded someone would be, “Ah, but trouble is everyone already knows who I am.”

“Happens,” Satsuki shrugged.

“But honestly I’m still really glad I invited so many people to live here. Something’s always going on, even if I don’t always know what.”

“Oh, me too,” Satsuki agreed, “Having the place full of life is something I didn’t hope for. I don’t think I even knew I wanted it. But when I see that there’s actually boats out on the lake, kids playing in the gardens, I can’t help but feel this is how it should be. And speaking of,” Satsuki pointed to the main door to the lounge. It was cracked open slightly, enough to see that three children, some of Ryuko’s “relatives”, were peeking in. When Ryuko turned, smiled, and waved at them the older boy and girl became self-conscious and that swiftly overwhelmed their curiosity about the queen and her cherry blossom crown.

The younger girl, however, was one Satsuki had taken a shine to. A distant relative of Tsumugu’s named Miki, she was only in her second year of primary school but was already so nearsighted she wore thick glasses. Satsuki beckoned her to come in and she scurried over.

“And how are you today Miki?” She asked.

“I’m very well, Miss Satsuki,” Miki piped back dutifully, exactly as Satsuki had coached her.

“Hey kid, only four days left til the big day, you excited?” Ryuko said, although this Miki did not answer. Reassured by Satsuki’s presence or not, Ryuko was still an intimidating prospect to her. And naturally that was very funny to Ryuko considering that until fairly recently it would have been the other way around and extremely so.

Satsuki lifted Miki up to sit on the arm of the armchair, where she was immediately drawn to play with Satsuki sleeve. “I like your sweater. It’s pretty.”

“Oh, why thank you. Ryuko made them. We match, see?” She motioned to Ryuko’s sweater, which she wore over the casual form of her Royal garb, with just the collar and cuffs of the blouse poking out. They were far from the most tacky Christmas sweaters Ryuko could have come up with, red for Ryuko and green for Satsuki with matching patterns of lines and little dots more designed to evoke snowdrifts and snowflakes rather than actually look like anything. Thin and not at all baggy too, they wouldn’t do a thing about the cold but that was hardly the point. “Now, did you finish that puzzle we started yet?”

“Mhm! I have a new one too, it’s got five hundr-er-*thousand* pieces!”

“Does it?” Satsuki laughed at the obvious hyperbole, “And what’s on it?”

“A town! With all little people on it and a little horse cart and a cat in a window,” Miki said excitedly. It was no surprise to Ryuko that Miki was Satsuki’s favorite of the children.

“Well that sounds very fun. Do you want to make it together?” Satsuki asked, as if there was any doubt. Miki nodded her head vigorously. “Okay, go on ahead. I’ll be up in a minute.”

Miki bustled out of the room just as quickly as she’d come in, and Satsuki made a contented little sigh. “Can we keep her?” She asked Ryuko with a giggle.

“Yeah there’s no denying it, that is a cute kid,” Ryuko said.

“And smart too. She’s going places, you can tell.”

“Yeah, especially with all the time she spends with you. Just then you even sounded like a teacher,” Ryuko said, avoiding saying what she was really thinking – a mom. Because, *in a couple months we’re gonna be having **that** conversation, for real*, and that thought was kind of terrifying.

“In another life, perhaps I would’ve enjoyed that career,” Satsuki said as she stood, “But for now I have a puzzle to make, and then Soroi is coming over a little early and we’re going to have tea before everyone else gets here. You’re welcome to join us for that but you’ll have to find something else for your boredom until then.”

Ryuko gave her a confident smile, “I think I can handle that.”

“Well that’s reassuring. Oh, and by the way Rei texted while I was talking to Miki. She asked if she should bring her presents tonight,” Satsuki said, turning back to Ryuko at the door and taking out her phone.

“Yeah, she might as well. She’s going all out with that, huh?”

“Wouldn’t you in her position? How could they understand when they weren’t there? At least none of them seem to be questioning *our* sanity, though we’ve given them just as much cause as she to do so. At least in my opinion,” Satsuki answered. So far the only comments Satsuki had received were some flustered stammering from Nonon about how one night wasn’t nearly long enough to get her out of that dangerous state of mind, a “not my business” from Shiro, a sage “you’re a bigger person than I would’ve been” from Ira, and an amused chuckle from Aikuro before he immediately changed the subject. But on the other hand, none of the Kamui Corps had

texted Rei in the days since. Satsuki had no idea if that was because they didn't even know how to broach the topic, or because they truly didn't want anything to do with her.

"We'll make it right tonight," Ryuko said, "Not sure how, but we'll do it."

"It'll take more than some presents," Satsuki said. "But I think it can be done."

"It will be done," Ryuko said. "Oh, by the way, speaking of presents, did you want anything in particular for Christmas?"

Satsuki's face immediately went blank, "Ryuko it's in *four* days."

"I know, I'm sorry!" Red faced and sheepish, Ryuko rubbed a hand behind her head, "It didn't slip my mind I swear, I just kinda got stumped, y'know? You never really seem to want anything, and I don't *think* you dropped any hints. But it's fine, I'm sure considering that it's *me* I can get anything you'd want in time."

For a brief moment Satsuki fought down her disappointment. Yes, she had been hoping for something romantic, but then again Ryuko was right, "It's true, there isn't really anything I want I don't have already. Well, not anything that makes a Christmas present. So don't worry about it. Really," She said warmly.

And Ryuko's relief felt like enough of a gift. What could be better, really?

~~~~~

The idea was that getting the whole gang together on either Christmas or New Years would open them to a surprise attack from REVOCS. The reconquest armies were camped ready in both North and South to launch a full scale invasion of the heartland of China as soon as the snows cleared up, so REVOCS would be watching from right across the mountains for an opportunity like that. So instead it was this day, a random weekday, when they arranged for this secret meeting, all back in Japan for the first time since Nonon and company left for Indonesia. As for New Years, Ryuko was going to fly out to the front lines to celebrate with the troops, and that event was much publicized.

Ryuko was beside herself with excitement as first Ira and Mako, then Tsumugu and Aoi and finally Mataro, Aikuro, Nonon, Uzu, Houka, Shiro, and Yuda all at once arrived, already tipsy from pregaming at Mataro's penthouse. Well, except Shiro that was. In fact, he was more morose than usual, mumbling to Izanami and staring at his phone constantly.

That didn't stop the rest of them though, and they dove onto the appetizers almost before saying hello. Not that Ryuko really heard, she was bubbling with happiness just watching.

"Alright, alright people," Aikuro said stridently, "Let me answer the question that's on everyone's minds: who's gonna bartend? The answer may surprise you."

"Is it you?" Nonon asked snidely.

"It's me!" Aikuro declared as he hopped over the sleek bar counter, "Figure I give Mataro a break this time. Unless he wants to, of course."

“I mean, do you want me to?” Mataro asked, looking up from a plate piled high with chips and crackers with cheese.

“Do you want to?”

“No.”

“Then no,” Aikuro said.

“Oh thank go- oh shit – I mean, hey Rei,” Mataro cut himself off as the main door opened.

Silence fell. There was Rei with a frail, frightened smile on her face and unwieldy bags of gifts and colored tissue paper in each hand. Furashada was on her shoulders – this was the compromise they’d worked out, with him riding there unless they needed to transform for combat. Instead she wore a deep maroon wool coat with a turtleneck and a skirt underneath it. Lovely clothes, but to her current audience it was so foreign to see her not wearing Furashada that she hardly even looked like herself. It only reinforced that there was something shameful about this, that it was her penance walk. Everyone averted their eyes, but it was impossible to pretend she wasn’t there.

Ryuko could feel the fraying in the air. Furashada was reaching out to his siblings, and they wavered. They wanted him back, they wanted things the way they were, but how could they be? Ryuko felt like sinking into the couch, she was suddenly understanding just what this felt like for them. The simple fact that Rei had tried to murder Satsuki was all they understood, all they needed to understand. This was going to be harder than she’d hoped.

Satsuki gave her knee a reassuring squeeze and stood up. “Rei! So good to see you! Here, let me help you with those bags.”

Rei looked like she could melt from gratefulness. Everyone else, on the other hand, was shocked. It wasn’t so much a conundrum as a gut feeling. They couldn’t call Rei their friend after what she’d done – horribly sad though that was – and they hadn’t really expected that they would have to. But now here was Satsuki insisting on exactly that! Nevermind that she was nuts for forgiving Rei, they’d all long ago realized and forgiven that, but *she* couldn’t expect them to look at Rei the same.

Satsuki surveyed all this and said, “Oh what? I’d expect you of all people to be more understanding. Who among you can honestly say they haven’t taken a swing at me? Uh, not counting our noncombatant friends, obviously,” She said, motioning to Mako and Aoi and Soroi.

“I do recall that I had to tear you away from the sword display at the Art Museum when you were seven, if that counts,” Soroi said, to a smattering of laughter.

“Oh yes, I stand corrected, you see even Soroi has done it.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever taken up arms against you,” Ira said hesitantly, “Outside of training.”

Satsuki answered quickly, “You said you wouldn’t directly attack me because you knew I’d win, but you still fought me when we first met. You’re the only edge case.”

“When did I *ever*!” Nonon blurted.



“You physically assaulted me not too long ago.”

“I slapped you!”

“Yes, and that’s more than Rei actually managed,” Satsuki said, which shut Nonon up good.

Houka had his hand on his chin, “Let’s see, I’m trying to think. Oh no wait, there was that friendly fire incident with the *Naked Sol*’s guns, right. Touche.”

Mataro opened his mouth next, but before he could even get a word in Satsuki said, “Mataro no. You tried to sneak attack me at the dojo?”

“Yeah, yeah,” He mumbled amidst laughter. The tension in the air was starting to lighten palpably.

While that was happening Aikuro leaned over the bar to Tsumugu and whispered, “Hey, did we ever? There was that time I was going to when she was fighting Ryuko but-,”

“And *you* two were key planners in a conspiracy which if successful would have included my assassination. That definitely counts. Anyone else?”

Ryuko and Uzu both shrugged and smiled at each other – there was no denying they’d both attacked Satsuki almost as soon as they met her. But Yuda said, “Well, I don’t think I-,”

“You’re new, give it time,” Satsuki cut him off, “This is a rite of passage for us. I’m disappointed to see you all disparaging our time-honored traditions.” This was met with a chuckle from everyone, a certain short, throaty laugh that could only be described as the “yup, that’s our Lady Satsuki for you” laugh. As always, she was exactly right. “Now, I would really appreciate a glass of wine right now, Aikuro. And something sweet and non-alcoholic for Rei would be great too.”

“I never did.”

“Excuse me?” Satsuki turned as for the first time since getting there Shiro spoke.

“I’ve never taken a swing at you,” He said, still looking at his phone.

“Oh, well, you know that’s true,” Satsuki nodded, “Thank you Shiro, for your loyal friendship.”

He shrugged, “It’s fine.”

~~~~~

It wasn’t instant, but over time things began to warm up. Rei was, after all, still Rei. And it was Christmas. The conversation was loud and chaotic, everyone talking and laughing over each other filled the room. Outside a light dusting of snow and a howling wind were uninviting, but inside a dim, warm glow lit the room from lanterns and Christmas lights. Music, mostly Nonon’s, blared but they managed to talk over it just fine.

And it felt *so* nice. It had been a long time since they’d all been able to get together and just shoot the breeze and Ryuko loved every minute. With the war, with her relationship with

Satsuki causing split opinions, she'd been scared that these times might have been gone for good. But now she knew even an attempted murder would, in time, become water under the bridge. It felt like a promise of more to come. All the rest of their lives could be just like this once REVOCS was out of the picture. Satsuki on one side, Mako on the other, presiding over her little family as its unofficial matriarch.

Indeed, by the time they were seated for dinner Rei was almost fully back in the group. Any lasting discomfort was minor, enough to have enthusiastic conversation, even laugh at her jokes.

"Oh! Did you hear about this new disaster movie that's all based on the Cocoon Sphere and everything?" Mako asked, shouting it across the table.

"What in the..." Nonon said, bemused.

"No, haven't. This is a real thing, you're saying?" Uzu asked.

"Yu-huh! They just released the trailers today. It looks like a total ripoff, it's gonna be so bad!" Mako giggled.

"And you're excited about this?" Satsuki asked.

Ryuko laughed and said, "Sats see I only show you movies I like, what you mighta not learned is there's this whole trend online of watching *terrible* movies, the 'so bad they're good' type. For laughs. People've done it for years, it's nothing new."

"Ah, I see. And this is going to be one such film?"

"Ohhh yeah," Mako nodded vigorously, "It's just a movie about people falling from the sky, it's gonna be trash."

"You know," Aikuro said, "I'm not sure it's gonna be the type of movie you like."

"Why? Izzit scary?"

"That's what I tried to tell her," Ira shrugged, "But you should see the trailer, it's not *explicitly* about life-fibers but you can tell where they got their ideas."

"I'm kind of surprised this exists," Rei said, "I mean, I would've thought it would be too soon to put that to film."

"Well, it's not like anyone actually died from the Cocoon Sphere. They just got put back where they were," Uzu said, "Uh, right?"

"I mean I guess so," Nonon said.

"What, you mean you've never wondered about that?" Ira asked

And Houka followed it up with, "You mean you never just... looked it up? One of the most important events in history and one we were all involved in, you guys."

"Actually, I know for a fact that some people did get hurt when they were released from the Cocoon Sphere," Satsuki said.

“Is that right?” Houka said - skeptically, because he *had* looked it up and there weren’t any major incidents in the hospital records.

“Yeah, there’s a cook who works right here who got hurt. Dropped down right onto his knife, poked his eye out.”

“Wha – poked his eye out!”

“Yeah, he has a patch now. He doesn’t have any depth perception either now. Used to do sushi, but now he can’t do anything that involves precision cutting so he just bakes bread and such. I’m serious, he has like an understudy who does it all for him.”

Rei said, “Wait a second, is any of this true?” and a stunned silence fell over the table.

“... Yes,” Satsuki said, completely straight faced.

“What’s his name.”

“Uh... his name is... Yyyosh?” And Ryuko immediately burst into hysterical laughter.

Nonon abruptly slammed her fork down, “You made that up? Why!” But it was so unexpected that she couldn’t help but giggle, and it was infectious. Even the people who weren’t involved in the conversation had a good laugh. Not even at the joke itself – which was really just for her and Ryuko – but at the idea of *Satsuki* tricking people for her own amusement, with that mischievous smile on her face. Just a little bit of Ryuko’s influence and all of a sudden she was capable of this, the absurdity alone was hilarious.

“I-I don’t know,” Satsuki managed to say between gasping breaths, “Makes me laugh.”

“It’s not funny!”

“You’re laughing though!” Satsuki retorted

“You’re drunk!” Nonon squealed back.

“No! Okay, well maybe a bit,” Satsuki held up her hands, “But it is funny.”

Nonon had gotten herself under control by now and said, “Yeah, alright, it was kinda funny. But only because I didn’t expect it.”

“I know, I know, I only recently discovered I had any sense of humor too, turns out it tends to work that way. By the way, how’d you figure it out, Rei?”

“Well, you almost had me but then I see Ryuko has this stupid smirk on her face and I instantly knew something was up!” Rei answered.

“Ah, I see, so you put her up to this,” Aikuro said.

Ryuko, still giggling to herself, waved a hand, “No, no she just does this. She even tries it on me! Or she’ll hide something and say I must have lost it.”

“I do *not*!” Satsuki gasped, scandalized.

“Oh yeah, then how’d my boots turn up in the laundry chute?” Ryuko said, crossing her arms and pretending to be mad.

Satsuki’s indignant response, “Wha- you- well if you don’t want that to happen don’t just throw your shoes wherever on the closet floor you like or else, they’ll get scooped up with the laundry.”

“Ohhmygod that’s where shoes go! On the floor!”

Satsuki wouldn’t continued this adorable little spat further, but Rei tapped her on the shoulder and said, “Hey, I wouldn’t worry about that. She’s been doing it for years.”

“That right?”

And Mako added, “For years,” which Mataro supported with a nod.

“Sounds like her as a kid too, if Kinue’s griping was anything to go off of,” Tsumugu added, and once again everyone was laughing.

Well, everyone except Shiro. He’d barely touched his food and was still staring into his phone. The feeling off his aura was completely out of sync with anyone else. Just... distracted. She might’ve just ignored it, Shiro being Shiro, but then everything else was basically perfect. So why not try to fix it.

After dinner she pulled Houka aside and asked him about it.

“Ugh, he’s been like this all week,” Houka groaned. “It’s the hybrid project,” He went on in a hushed voice, “He’s nearly finished, but he’s hit an impasse. It’s a problem with the magnetic field structure of the containment circuit, I don’t know how your father – no, nevermind, I’m not talking shop here.”

“Yeah, thanks for that,” Ryuko nodded. “Anyway, want me to try and do something about it?”

“Couldn’t hurt,” Houka said, “I’ve tried just about everything, but maybe it’s just becoming more and more of me nagging.”

Everyone else was busying themselves with a card game, so Ryuko plopped down on the couch next to him.

“Hey, not gonna play? ‘Cuz you? Would kill at Texas Holdem. C’mon, look at how Mataro and Yuda are cleaning Mako out. That doesn’t look like fun?” Ryuko asked. Shiro just grunted noncommittally. “Geez, who shit in your cereal?”

*[Ryuko, we appreciate the attention, but this is just too important,]* Izanami said.

“Yeah? Well it’ll still be there tomorrow. Tonight, I got two words for you. Hey, you even listening?” She shook him.

“Could you not?” Shiro huffed.

“C’mon man, at least guess.”

Shiro sighed, "Fine. 'Cheer up?' "

"No. Better. 'Gravity Bong'."

It was hard for Shiro to hide the momentary light in his eyes. Especially with Ryuko shaking him and going "eh? eh?" Finally, he threw up his hands and said, "Aaalright, you got me. I wasn't gonna get any work done with you breathing down my neck anyway."

~~~~~

Snow and howling winds, fearsome though they seemed, were not all a threat to hybrids or kamui. Ryuko and Shiro sat out by the frozen lake in a gazebo, where at least the bootleg little smoking operation Ryuko had set up wouldn't be blow away.

"Jesus, you took that hit like a champ. Here, want the tail a' this one?" Ryuko waved her bottle at him enticingly.

"God yes," He eagerly inhaled the thin haze of smoke and said, "Can't you just, y'know, look into the future and tell me how I eventually solve this? Or-or go back and figure out how your dad did it?" He laughed in a thin, unhappy way.

"I told you, it doesn't work like that."

"But *why* not? Ryuko you think I *want* to be doing this?" He said, shaking his head, "I've been a real jerk to my boyfriend lately, you know that? I know. At first we were on the same page with this one but then it started to get hard, and then there was REVOCS... I'll make it up to him. At this point I just want the damn project to be over."

"Right, and then onto the next one," She said.

"Haha, not funny. No, after this I'm gonna take a looong break. Maybe kill some bad guys. Everyone else seems to have fun with that."

"Oh. So..."

"Heheheh, y'know it's funny to call 'em bad guys. Think we might be the first in history where that's just... unambiguously true." She abruptly lifted his head, locking onto Ryuko with tired eyes, "Hey, Ryuko? Do you trust me?"

Ryuko didn't bat an eye before saying, "'Course I do. Uh, why?"

"A while back, you said if you ever had even the slightest reason, you'd destroy my lab you'd do it in a heartbeat. Obviously, I wasn't chill with that. But just now, I find myself thinking that it might be better for me if you did do it. And the hybrid project's nearly done. Finished. Ready to be used. But if you went and trashed everything I've done do you really think I'd even try to stop you?"

"Well when I said that I didn't think you'd have Izanami and actually be able to fight back. I didn't actually think we'd even be using life-fibers 'sides maybe Saiban. Shit changes," She shrugged. That was one threat she had no intention of acting on, even if she was trying not to think about the consequences of letting Shiro make more hybrids. Seeing the toll the work was

exacting on him only made her more sure. He was *exhausted*. She wouldn't make that be for nothing, she couldn't.

"Still, still, we wouldn't fight back. So I just need you to trust me when I say that immortality, being like you, is the best thing for humanity. If it were about me I'd go there tonight and throw all my notes in a fire myself. It's about our *future*. You get it, right?"

"Man, not even the weed gets your mind off this shit," Ryuko grumbled.

"Say you get it."

"Yeah, I get it, I get it. Now get up before it really hits, I got a new idea."

~~~~~

"Okay, now you might not be Aikuro, but I get the feeling you're still gonna appreciate this," Ryuko said as she yanked open the thick metal door of a small concrete shed behind the sports complex.

"Oh god, I think you were right about it not having hit yet because – yo..." Shiro cut himself off when Ryuko flicked on the light in the shed.

Guns. Quite a lot of them actually. Everything from handguns and hunting rifles to military machine guns and snipers, all neatly stacked on some crude but sturdy shelves Ryuko had made herself.

"What in fuck... I mean when did you... why?" Shiro asked.

"So the funny thing is Americans gave 'em to me at my coronation. Who even knows what they were thinking," Ryuko said.

"The Americans. Well that's... on the nose, wow," He laughed to himself

"Yeah, that's what I said. But what the hell, I have them now, I figured I might set up a little shooting range in my free time. Here, peep this," She lifted the largest one, a monstrous rifle taller than her by more than a foot and passed it to him. Feeling dizzy, Shiro immediately used it as a makeshift cane, but in spite of that she could tell he was dumbfounded. "One hundred cal. I don't know what redneck dumbass thought it was a good idea, but a normal person can't even use it without dislocating their shoulder."

"But with a kamui..." He said, catching her drift. "You know, Izanami and I could do more damage than this ourselves, but I bet there's a certain unique experience to this."

"Ohhh yeah. Now c'mon, do something fun for once in your miserable life and blast some holes in boulders while baked out of your mind with me."

A few minutes later, Ryuko got a text from Satsuki that read, *\*What the hell are you doing out there it sounds like the end of the world!\**

When she eventually managed to type out a response, all that it read was *\*Shiro's enjoying the party\**

# Matoi Homestead

## Chapter Summary

Whoa it's another holiday one! Why? Well I had an idea for an NSFW scene and I wanted to partition it here, plus some other stuff I didn't have a place for anywhere else. Plus also I need a little more time to plan the wedding chapter, which is soon. So have this one and its NSFW (but imo still tasteful) scene and the other fun fluffy scenes.

And the little Nonon bit at the end too, which is not really either of those things.

December 2067

~~~~~

When Satsuki woke up on Christmas morning, Ryuko was already up and gone. In fact, she probably woke up because Ryuko was gone – without her warmth her arms and legs were beginning to get cold. She rolled up, folded her arms, and wished to herself that Ryuko hadn't gone far, that she'd be back soon. *Wow, maybe I am getting too dependent on her*, she thought, but that only made Satsuki think of *her* still more, and with that pleasant thought she drifted back off to sleep.

As usual, the nightmare inserted itself at the worst possible time. Satsuki merely shut her eyes for a moment, and she was back on that endless sweep of mud and roiling, ashy clouds. Again, the looming presence of a stone woman she now understood to be Ryuko, so tall her head was lost in the clouds. Only this time it felt calmer. She was not surrounded by decaying bodies, nor was there the unbearable pressure emanating out from the statue of Ryuko. All was still. Satsuki had the time to realize, *This is the first time I've been able to get a look at the place*, before she was awoken again.

This time it was by the soft press of Ryuko's lips on hers. She was floating over the bed, smug in her precise control over her powers. Satsuki smiled and cupped her cheek.

"Mornin' sleepyhead. Merry Christmas!" Ryuko said cheerfully, drifting back off the bed and spinning happily through the air.

*She sure does get a kick out of doing that*, "And a Merry Christmas to you too dear."

Ryuko landed neatly behind a cart rolled up to the side of the bed, "And I got us something special to start the day off right!" She lifted the high domed metal lid of the cart to reveal a lap-table with a full course breakfast spread out on it. Natto, pancakes, miso soup, bacon and sausage, eggs over easy the way Satsuki liked, a sandwich on French toast cut in half for them, and fruit and Christmas cookies for dessert. And of course, a pot of tea. "Breakfast in bed!"

"Oh no, crumbs in our bed!" Satsuki replied, "Kidding, kidding. We can wash the sheets." Ryuko, with a big dorky grin on her face, floated the lap-table over to Satsuki ever so

carefully. She looked so proud when she presented it to Satsuki that she asked, “Did you make any of this?”

“Well, I did the strawberries,” Ryuko answered, pointing to the strawberries arranged in the shape of a heart. She’d even taken the time to slice the strawberries to look like hearts themselves, and topped each with a very tiny, delicate dollop of whipped cream. “It’s not much but like you say what do we have chefs for?”

“Oh, don’t be modest, it looks adorable,” Satsuki said as Ryuko sat next to her and slid under the covers. “This is all wonderfully thoughtful, thank you. Only, I think I’ll be stuffed for the rest of the day!”

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” Ryuko giggled, “Now’s the perfect time, am I right?”

“Definitely. Now, I think I shall begin with the Fontina,” Satsuki said, swiftly and delicately preparing a cup of tea before picking up a sandwich half.

“Oh, that’s what that’s called,” Ryuko said, trying it herself, “Mmm! Damn, *not bad*.”

“It’s one of Nonon’s favorites, actually.”

“Ugh, ‘course it is? Why is it that normal food’s never good enough for her? To me it’s just some obscure western sandwich our western chef said you’d like,” Ryuko grunted.

Satsuki replied “Well, he knows my tastes well. Hey, at least don’t nibble it like that, that’s just about the ideal way to make crumbs!”

“I’m just sampling it! My stomach’s not so big as most!” Ryuko protested. Still, she had a habit for forgetting that when eating with good company, and Satsuki was the best company.

In fact, a good portion of the fun was just watching Satsuki. She was so elegant, so gracious and *god* you could just tell how much this little moment meant to her. Ryuko had to spoil her.

So she said, “Hey, I have an idea for how to make this *really* special for you.”

“Oh?” Satsuki looked up as Ryuko grinned mischievously and began sliding herself down the bed, running a hand along Satsuki’s thigh as she did. Satsuki’s eyebrows flew up, “Not while I’m eating! Ew.”

“But I’m hungry toooo,” Ryuko protested in a breathy, enticing voice.

Satsuki chuckled, “Double ew. Here, have this instead.” She offered a forkful of pancake to Ryuko and, relenting, she let Satsuki feed it to her.

“You don’t put syrup on your pancakes?” Ryuko asked.

“No, not usually,” Satsuki shrugged, “In my opinion you don’t really need it.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m sweet enough already.”

Satsuki hum-chuckled affectionately, “Dork.”



Ryuko giggled and said, “No, here’s what you do instead. Pour a little out on the plate – yeah, like that, you don’t need much. Okay, now dip the bacon and sausage in it.” In response to a thoughtful little noise from Satsuki she asked, “What, you’ve never done this before?”

“No, can’t say I have,” Satsuki answered.

“Oh boy, well prepare yourself, you’ll never eat breakfast the same way again.”

~~~~~

“... And so I wish you all well, from my family to yours. Regardless of nation, faith, or creed, while we live through this war for our survival, we all need to take this holiday season to remember what it is we’re fighting for. Our species, our world, our lives. And to remember that, sadly, there are many fellow citizens who need something else even more. Food, water, medicine, shelter: everything they have been denied by REVOCS and by their former so-called rulers. In a moment, I will transfer this broadcast to Oversight Committee Chairwoman Rei Hououmaru, live in Indonesia to show you the great strides we’ve made saving those affected by the eruption. But first, I have heard that many of you want to know – what would your queen have you do? How can we help her in this struggle? Well, this is the season of giving, but I don’t want you to give your money, or your blood on the battlefield. Leave that to me and my kamui. If I may, give from your time, and from your hearts. If I saw those of my citizens who are living now in safety and comfort volunteering to pack food and supplies for the warzone, if I saw you welcoming refugees into your neighborhoods with open arms, I think that would be the best gift I could ask for. Thank you, I love you all.”

Ryuko blew out a huge breath that puffed up her cheeks and nearly keeled over in her seat as the camera clicked off. Just about everyone else in the room – Ira, Mako, the rest of the Mankanshokus, and Tsumugu and Kinue and some of his family too – all did just about the same thing. It had been hard not to look too stiff, too artificial, and yet not too relaxed either during the course of Ryuko’s address to The League, but they all managed it. And now they were richly rewarded as the banquet trays were opened and in no time at all were swarmed with people.

“Good speech,” Satsuki said to Ryuko.

“They’re always good when you write them,” Ryuko answered, sipping some water to get the dry feeling from her mouth, “Ah, I still dunno. You still think doing this on Christmas was a good idea? You sure nobody’ll think I’m picking a favorite?”

Mako had returned with her food and sat down next to Ryuko. She laughed and said, “Nah, nah. It’s 2067, it’s *Christmas*, and we’re Japanese. People’d have to be *crazy* to think the holiday’s anything but an excuse to eat cookies to you. Croquette?”

“Nah, nah I’m still stuffed from breakfast,” Ryuko held up a hand. “I’d say you’re right Mako but there’s lots of crazy people out there is the only thing.”

“I’ll take it,” Satsuki held up her plate and Mako transferred a bit of her extra food over. “I think I may only be able to fit a little dinner in too, but no matter. This is still nice.” She gestured across the main dining hall, where practically every person who lived in the mansion – even the servants – were eating. And this was only the beginning, the festivities would continue well into the night. “This whole day has been nice, especially considering you arranged almost everything yourself dear. It’s almost enough to make up for you not getting any actual presents for me,” She nudged Ryuko with a conspiratorial smile to let her know she was (mostly) kidding.

“Hey! I said I was sorry!” Ryuko whispered back.

But Mako didn’t care if Satsuki was joking or not and hissed at Ryuko, “*Ryuko!* What’s the matter with you! You didn’t get your *fiancé* a Christmas present?”

“Mako, you don’t get it!” Ryuko protested, also in a hushed tone and with a very red face, “It’s hard to shop for her, she’s already got everything you could want!”

“That doesn’t matter! Haven’t you ever heard it’s the thought that counts?” Mako huffed, cheeks puffed and arms crossed. “Well it’s true!”

But Satsuki put a reassuring hand on Ryuko’s and said, “Mako, don’t worry, it really is fine. I was just giving her a hard time. I’m perfectly happy as I am.”

Mako let it drop until after dinner, when presents were being given out. Obviously, this was a big deal for the children, and the bulk of the time was spent on them – there were a lot. Satsuki, with some help from Ryuko, had picked out something for each of them. Always something educational, but also related to their interests, and she’d meticulously checked to make sure that it was popular with both the target audience and the people trying to teach them. Books for the older ones, games and toys for the younger. And of course for Miki not just that but a gigantic, 3D, paintable puzzle of the solar system which she was over the moon about. And her parents were shocked because they knew who Satsuki Kiryuin was and to think that she’d picked their daughter as a favorite was kind of terrifying, and yet also baffling because *this* was Satsuki Kiryuin?

Eventually everything thinned out until just Ryuko’s immediate family was present. In this case that meant Mako and Ira, Aoi and Tsumugu (he and Ira had secured the day off, but they were the only ones), Mataro the Mankanshoku parents and Tsumugu’s parents. In the more toned-down environment of a small den away from the rest of the party they exchanged their few, carefully selected gifts. They rotated around the room, everyone collecting all their gifts at once. And the second to last (Ryuko being last) was Satsuki. And her pile was one short.

Of course, she opened everything she was given graciously. But when they came to the last one there was an awkward little moment where everyone processed what exactly had happened.

Tsumugu asked, “Ryuko, did you not-,”

“No, she didn’t, I don’t know *why*,” Mako said, both being angry on Satsuki’s behalf and also feeling an obligation to help Ryuko learn from this mistake.

“Now now, Mako, not every couple needs to follow strict traditions,” Ira said sagely, “I’m sure spending this time with Ryuko is more than enough for Satsuki.”

Ryuko waved him off though, “Nah, really I do feel awful about this one. I mean, I’m sure there had to be something... wait a sec, I got it!”

Ryuko suddenly flourished her hand as though performing a magic trick. A bright point of light suddenly sprang into existence from her fingers and – and this did in fact look like magic – something emerged from it. An outfit – a short sky-blue dress with a delicately embroidered blue and gold sash and epaulettes on the shoulders, navy tights with an iridescent line on the sides, and

matching high-heeled boots to go with it. Everyone gasped as it traced itself into existence and drift slowly into Satsuki's lap.

"Ryuko! What... is this?" Satsuki, barely able to process it, lifted the outfit, rubbing her hands over its smooth surface. "This is life-fibers!"

"Yup! It's *my* life-fibers. And it's yours," Ryuko said proudly. She grinned as she watched Satsuki lean forward and clutch the outfit to her chest, eyes glinting with excitement.

"You mean this is like what you're wearing right now?" Satsuki asked, trying to get the words out as quickly as possible.

"You bet. It's not quite so strong as a kamui, but now you'll be bulletproof! Plus, I'll always know where you are now," Ryuko answered.

"I don't really know what to say. I'm gonna go get changed!"

Ryuko tried to stop her from getting up, "Hey, can't you give everyone a chance to gush first?"

"Oh, there'll be plenty of time for that once I'm wearing it!" Satsuki slid her shoulders out from Ryuko's grasp and hurried off to find the nearest open bathroom.

Ira chuckled as he watched her go, "You did real good with that one Ryuko. She never saw it coming."

"Wha- hold on, you knew!" Mako rounded on Ira, jumping up onto the sofa to pound impotently on his chest with half-hearted little fists.

"Of course, someone had to keep you off Ryuko's back. Because if you knew, you'd feel bad and tell Satsuki," he ruffled her hair as she pouted.

Mako sighed and turned around to plop into his lap, admitting, "Yeah, alright, I woulda."

"Oh, and that reminds me," Ryuko said, getting out of her chair and plopping down on the sofa next to them, "I made this for Mako too." She opened her hand, and inside was a wide bracelet of silky, synthetic life-fiber material. "It won't give her powers or anything, but it will make her bulletproof and let me know her general location. Now we don't have to worry about assassination attempts on you, which'll do *for now*."

"Wooo-hoo I can go to the grocery store again!" Mako cheered, her annoyance at being left out of Ryuko's secret totally forgotten.

"Oh no," Ira groaned, "You're going to spend all afternoon bothering the man at the cheese counter again, aren't you?"

"It's impooortant! You gotta get the kind that pairs with your crackers right!"

At this point, Ryuko felt that Satsuki had put her on and she tried to reach out and make the link between them. She'd learned to take it easy at first, so she didn't accidentally blast half the mansion apart with raw energy. Still, the moment she did it Ryuko wished she'd been alone for this.

She felt Satsuki. Not her thoughts and feelings, this connection didn't really work like that, but her physical presence. Every inch of her body and the way her heartbeat raced through it. She'd get used to it in time but for now it was much too intimate for present company and Ryuko's face went red from hair to neck.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Mako asked.

Ryuko buried her face in her hands, "Oh god, don't look at me. I – I gotta go!"

And, to the surprise of everyone else who had fallen back into their own conversations she breezed off after Satsuki, looking as calm as she could. When she got to the bathroom she didn't even have to knock, Satsuki flung open the door and without hardly even looking at each other they collided in a passionate kiss.

They did not return to the party for quite some time.

~~~~~

It was late in the evening, and Ryuko and Satsuki had retired to their room. Below, the dull noise of festivities continued – the kids had been put to bed, the teenagers were dug in in their hangouts, and the adults were either breaking out the decaf coffee or starting on another round of drinks depending on disposition. Satsuki enjoyed that constant drone of sound, it only enhanced the peacefulness of watching a movie alone with Ryuko to remember that life was going on outside.

"You want me to refill your drink?" She asked, getting up and stepping out of the "conversation pit" in the middle of room. Ryuko stayed laying amidst the pillows that filled it, leaned against its plush, curved side, the very picture of relaxation.

"Nah, nah, I'm good. Grab me another cookie if you like, but 'sides that I'm good. I feel like tonight's not really a 'get wasted' kinda night, you know?"

"Oh, I agree. I want you fully aware for the rest of tonight," Satsuki said. As she made her way to the table where they'd laid a bottle of spiked eggnog (which was so incredibly rich that it was probably half the reason Ryuko was done drinking on its own) and a plate of cookies, she turned an enthusiastic, girlish twirl to see the skirts of her new outfit fly. She couldn't help it, and she didn't have to help it when it was just her and Ryuko.

Ryuko watched appreciatively, "You like it?"

"Oh shut up," Satsuki replied, "You know I love it."

"You want to see the other side of what it can do?"

"Um, do you mean the combat capabilities? Because yes, absolutely I do, but I thought tomorrow we might-,"

"No, not that," Ryuko said, cool as could be. She snapped her fingers into a finger gun pointed at Satsuki and all of a sudden, the clothes on Satsuki's body began to shift. Fabric closed in upon itself, glowing lines morphed and slid, and what had moments before been a short dress with tights and boots to match was now lacy lingerie, white and blue and delicate looking.

Satsuki's face immediately fell, "Nooo, Ryuuko," She said in a disappointed, plaintive tone.

"Got you!" Ryuko smirked, but Satsuki didn't respond in kind, so she got up and said, "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Well if I'd know this whole thing was just so you could play *dress up* with me..." She quickly reached behind her back to unclasp the bra.

"Hey hey hey. Whoa. I'm sorry, alright?" Ryuko hurried up to Satsuki, suddenly genuinely worried. It wasn't that Satsuki had a problem showing off her body for Ryuko – far from it – but not having a choice in the matter, feeling tricked, that might make her feel a bit too *used*. And that wasn't acceptable. "I just thought it'd be a funny way to show you it can change form –,"

"- That *you* can change its form."

"You really think I'd ever do it without your permission?" Ryuko gently lowered Satsuki's arms to her sides. "Come on, this is a cool ability for you, not just for my fun."

Satsuki sighed, rubbing her fingers over Ryuko's hands, "You're lucky I love you."

"Don't I know it," Ryuko smirked. "Here, want me to make it something a little more modest?"

"I wouldn't be opposed," Satsuki said, and without a moment's hesitation the lingerie shifted again, shedding new fabric to make a set of smooth, satin pajamas that fit comfortably over them. "Oh. Well, uh, this is kind of nice."

"Right? See, this is how I see it – and I don't know you've read philosophy maybe this is stupid – but when you put on clothes, it's sort of like a mask. You sort of fill a role, y'know what I mean? But that's not really the real you."

Satsuki nodded, "Sure. You mean that people take a certain comfort from wearing the uniform of a job, or of their role in society, even if that role is just an everyday ordinary person. They play the role, so to speak."

"Right! So, like, when I'm making a kamui I try to make it represent a person's *best* self, but when they transform, I don't have any control over what that looks like. Not even they know, it's kind of like... like an expression of their real selves," Ryuko said hesitantly.

"And because you need to learn to see your kamui as your skin to synchronize, that does follow from the idea that nudity represents not wearing any mask, playing any role. That's not stupid at all Ryuuko."

Ryuko grinned, they were on the same page, "Yes, yes exactly! You get it! But what we get with this, with life-fiber clothing made from me, isn't quite that. *We* get to change our mask, whenever we want. We can be whatever we want. Y'know, it makes me feel way more confident when I can wear *this*," Ryuko swiftly shifted from her casual clothes to her royal ensemble, "When I'm out there *playing my role* as the queen. And then right away I can be a little more laid back," just as quickly she shifted back to just her blouse and skinny jeans, "And now you can do it to. I know, right now it probably sounds no different than just having your wardrobe travel with you, but you'll see."

“I believe you, Ryuko, you don’t have to try and sell me on it. Just so long as you don’t try to change me against my will.”

“I won’t. Never again, that’s a promise,” Ryuko said emphatically, and she could tell Satsuki believed her. “But you did look gorgeous though.”

That gave Satsuki pause, especially when Ryuko pushed into her hips first. “Did I? Then, let me see yours.”

“Huh?”

“You demonstrated the... capabilities of my outfit, so let’s just say I’m curious about yours.”

Ryuko let Satsuki slowly creep her arms around her and with eyes shyly downcast said, “Oh, I get it.” She made a big show of sighing as her own outfit faded into underclothes even more demure and enticing than she had given Satsuki – black and red with a prominent cleavage window design. She could feel the immediate effect this had on Satsuki. *You want me, so, so badly. Well I’m all yours.*

But when the cherry blossoms around her head began to fade Satsuki grabbed them and said, “Ah-ah-ahh. Leave that.”

“O-oh,” Ryuko pretended like that scared her. Having Ryuko at her mercy was always a big turn on for Satsuki. It worked too, Satsuki leaned in eagerly, fully enveloping Ryuko with her greater height and longer arms. Of course, Ryuko enveloped her too, just not with her flesh and blood body.

“Hmm, I think I could get used to this,” Satsuki murmured in sultry tone and wasted no time sweeping Ryuko off her feet, tumbling down with her back into the conversation pit. It was a move fully intended to knock the wind out of Ryuko, but at the last minute Ryuko engaged her levitation and the change in momentum allowed her to grab Satsuki’s arm and flip them around, so she ended up pinning Satsuki, straddling her waist.

“Nice move,” Ryuko said appreciatively, “But not good enough.”

“That was cheating,” Satsuki whined.

“Oh, like you care.”

“Then you won’t mind if I do *this*,” Satsuki summoned up her newly enhanced strength, marveling at how even a tiny increase in force resulted in her lifting Ryuko clear off her body just by her chin. She whipped her around and, fully aware that she still should *really* challenge Ryuko in a test of strength, quickly finished things by pinning her with a knee on her back and a ruthless armbar that cleanly popped her shoulder out of its socket.

“Ah! Ah! My freakin’ arm you jerk!” Ryuko yelped even as her healing factor overwhelmed Satsuki – try though she might – and her humerus slotted back in place.

“Oh, don’t be such a baby,” Satsuki said, caressing Ryuko’s hips with her free hand, gloating over her victory. “You gave me this power, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, and you sure know how to use it,” Ryuko grunted, “Now get your ass offa me, you know I could just throw you off if I wanted right?”

“I do. But you won’t. Aww, don’t worry though, I know how to be gentle too,” Satsuki practically purred, “If that’s what you want.”

“Nnn-,” Ryuko moaned, Satsuki had given up the pretense that they were really fighting and moved her pinning hand to massage Ryuko’s back ever-so-slowly, while the other crept up her inner thigh. Laying prone like she was Ryuko had only her sense of touch to tell her what Satsuki was doing, no indication of how much longer she would keep up this painfully slow teasing. “No... you won... I don’t get to decide.”

“Ah, so that’s how it’s going to be,” Ryuko squirmed at those words. She’d come to love this anticipation – both sides of it – almost as much as the actual act, even though even Mako finding out that her and Satsuki’s idea of foreplay was basically sexualized wrestling was still an inconceivable embarrassment.

It wasn’t but a moment more until Satsuki’s fingers finally alighted on the thin surface of Ryuko’s panties, electrifying in even the slightest touch. Ryuko gasped and in immediate reaction she absorbed all the remaining clothes on her body. And as though she’d been expecting it, Satsuki wasted no time plunging her fingers in. “Oh *fffuck!*” Ryuko gasped.

“Yes, I could *definitely* get used to this,” Satsuki murmured next to Ryuko’s ear, stretching herself out alongside her. The press of her chest and belly on Ryuko’s back only added to the growing pressure overtaking her body until all she could say between labored breaths was, “Sats... Sats...”. At which point Satsuki said very softy, “We’re going to turn you around now, okay? I want to see your face.”

It was a maneuver that required a good deal of delicacy and even more flexibility on Ryuko’s part, but it was also one they’d practiced. In one smooth motion Ryuko rolled and lifted a leg until it was almost parallel with her body and managed to smoothly turn herself without interrupting the methodical pace of Satsuki’s thrusts. But when they did lock eyes the smug look in Satsuki’s eyes told Ryuko, *no, not enough, I need more*, and so she propped herself up and laid a hand on Satsuki’s chest, rising with her until she was sitting in her lap, legs wrapped around her.

In this position she could add the motion of her hips to Satsuki’s fingers, and Satsuki put her other hand on the hourglass curve of Ryuko’s waist to help guide her. Ryuko clutched tight to Satsuki and buried her face between neck and shoulder, and everywhere their bodies met Ryuko’s life-fiber clothes melted away to nothing.

“That’s it, that’s right,” She coaxed Ryuko gently, and Ryuko felt numb from the flush in her face, only aware of the connection between her at Satsuki and the dam inside her about to burst. This was maybe the best part of the whole thing, the peak where her whole world was Satsuki, all she could think about was Satsuki.

“Sats, Sats! I’m so close!” She gasped, which turned out to be a mistake because almost immediately Satsuki slowed. “Hey!”

“Sorry dear, but the payoff is better with a little patience. You know that,” Satsuki crooned, cupping her chin condescendingly. Ryuko growled in frustration and tried to speed up her own motion, but Satsuki deftly matched her pace, and no relief came. “Shh... calm yourself.”

But Ryuko called her bluff and shoved her further back into the pillows with an insistent hand on her chest. “Satsuki, don’t make me-,”

Satsuki laughed and said, “Have it your way, my dear.” And cupped her fingers *right* where she knew it would hit Ryuko best. And it didn’t take much to drive her over the edge.

“Ah-*Ahh!* Ohhh... oh... fuck, *Sats.*”

Satsuki couldn’t keep herself from making her trademark hum-chuckle, almost compulsively as she watched. It was immensely satisfying to her to bring Ryuko to this state, *only she* had the privilege of pleasuring her. And it was a privilege to be here with the one and only Ryuko, the one and only “living goddess”, to share this with her.

“Good?” She asked gently, and Ryuko chuckled.

“Good? Sats, you *know* if it was good.” Ryuko stretched out to kiss her and run her hands through her hair.

“Well then I’m proud of my handiwork,” Satsuki said.

Ryuko lifted herself off Satsuki, refreshing cool air moving between their bodies. It was only a brief moment to catch their breath before Ryuko’s face took on a downright devilish turn and she said, “Hey, I just got a crazy idea. I think I might have another power I didn’t even realize.”

“Oh?”

“Well, you remember when we were first trying out some of the *\*ahem\** toys I’ve acquired over the years, you said you didn’t think you were ready for the strapon?” Ryuko asked leading.

She saw Satsuki understand and give her a playful little shove, “No, you *can’t*. No way.”

“I mean, why not?” Ryuko grinned. “Here let me try...” She squeezed her eyes shut, focusing on the new form she was trying to take. And to her surprise it came about as naturally as anything else, new underwear tracing itself around her and then from that a sort of synthetic sex toy, ambery red-orange and clearly made from interwoven life-fibers. Nothing too crazy, based in shape on a moderate sized and low-detail vibrator Satsuki had good results with.

Satsuki cocked her eyebrows in amusement, “Kinky.”

“Ah shut-up, we doing this or not?”

Satsuki didn’t need a moment to consider, but a moment to mentally prepare. “Yes, of course we are. I’m... wow geez, okay,” She looked up at Ryuko and almost immediately began laughing at the thought that they had so assimilated the former threat to the world that it could be used so frivolously.

“Wh-what?” Ryuko asked, fully aware she looked quite ridiculous but also determined not to care. *Let’s just do this!*

“Oh nothing, nothing,” Satsuki slid forward a bit, taking Ryuko’s hands to guide her back down. “I think I’m ready to try something new tonight. And besides, I’m curious what the experience will be like for you.”



Ryuko grinned and said, “Oh, you’d better believe I’m hoping I feel something.” But unfortunately, in that moment when Satsuki spread her legs, at once so demure and vulnerable and yet eager, and Ryuko thought to herself, *this is gonna be amazing*, something very different happened.

The moment it made contact she jerked back like she’d been electrocuted. “GYAH!” Ryuko howled abruptly before toppling backwards to lay twitching and stiff in the middle of the conversation pit.

Satsuki immediately burst out laughing, as hard and noisy as she could. In fact, she couldn’t do anything else, doubled up and bleary eyed as Ryuko kept laying there for a solid half minute until she finally got up, still laughing, and managed, “Ohohohoho oh geez, oh no! Ryuko, Ryuko – Ahahaha – Ryuko are you alright?”

When Ryuko managed to catch her breath and wipe the slack look off her face she yelled, “Too fucking sensitive!”

“Aw, poor thing, how could you have -,”

“Don’t touch it! Jesus, you know what? It’s gone. It’s gone and never coming back!” In a flash Ryuko’s failed experiment vanished from her crotch. “Stop laughing!”

“I-I’m sorry, really! I just – the way you -,” Satsuki couldn’t get the words out. Ryuko slowly, tremulously got to her feet and tottered off towards the bathroom. “Ryuko wait! I’m sorry, where’re you going!”

“Fucking like a hot knife in my crotch – never again with that shit, you hear?” Ryuko turned around and pointed, determined.

“Oh... so it did feel bad then?”

Ryuko shrugged and said, “Well, uh, bad? I dunno, but it was just... too much.”

“I see. Because I didn’t think it was that bad of an idea, to be honest,” Satsuki said, now calmed down. “With some more experimentation, maybe you could make it somewhat tolerable? Or perhaps if you gave it to me, it might mitigate the – er – paralysis?”

“Or could make it worse.”

“That’s a possibility, but I wouldn’t want to give up so soon. Hey, wait, come back!” Satsuki said, holding out a hand as Ryuko kept walking to the bathroom.

“Geez, I’m just going to get some water!” Ryuko called, “You seriously thought we were done here?”

“Well no-,”

Ryuko tilted her head just enough that Satsuki could see her smile was back, in full predatory glory, “I’m just gonna get some water, and then I’ll be back with the old-fashioned plastic version. And then I’ll show you why maybe you shoulda helped instead of laughing at me!”

“Oh,” Even though she knew the threat was (mostly) in jest Satsuki was a bit intimidated, “Oh dear.”

~~~~~

Christmas day at the northern front in Dandong was a bit of a slower affair. Still snowy, still overcast, still bleak and grey. At least Nonon had brought Uzu, Houka, and Shiro up to keep her company, and now they sat drinking coffee on top of the skyscraper Nonon had taken as her command center and killed time.

“No, I’m telling you, im base form besides the shield a kamui gives you superstrength, superspeed *and* superreflexes. Three separate things!” Uzu was noisily insisting.

Nonon groaned, “Ugh, superspeed is just superstrength in your legs, dumbass! How else would it work?”

“Then reflexes then,” Uzu countered.

“Well that’s just superstrength in the little muscles in your fingers and toes and stuff,” Nonon was quick to point out.

“Nuh – uh!”

“It totally is,” She said with finality, “I mean, if any kamui has any ideas they can speak up, but I’m pretty sure Seijitsu agrees with you, and Saiban with me. Superstrength is all you get, it’s just different ways to use it.”

“Well then you two are dead wrong. Tell her she’s wrong,” Uzu said, pointing over to Houka and Shiro.

Houka sat up in his folding chair and said, “Actually you’re both wrong. There’s another ability you’ve overlooked – enhanced balance. And what muscles are associated with balance?”

Nonon was at a loss, “Uh…”

“Feet?” Uzu offered.

Houka shook his head and made a smug tittering sound, “It’s your inner ear. So while you debate the semantics over various muscular enhancements, I can tell you that there are at *least* three abilities a base form kamui provides.”

“...Huh. So do you think -,” Nonon stopped talking when Shiro leapt to his feet without warning, hand on his Seki-Tekko.

“Perimeter cameras. Ultima uniforms. They’re trying to sneak into the warehouses in the northern shipping district, going after our munitions,” He said quickly.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Uzu groaned.

“Afraid not.”

“Looks like those sons of bitches actually went and did the whole Christmas surprise attack thing after all,” Nonon said. She didn’t need to give an order for the rest to leap up, transforming as fast as they could and leaping from rooftop to rooftop in the direction of the enemy.

“... Hey, uh, Nonon? You coming?” Uzu was the last to go, with a worried look on his face.

“Huh? Yeah, yeah I’ll be right on it,” Nonon said absently, and Uzu left – assured that the three of them could get the job done even without her. Leaving Nonon standing watching the movement of the people below, barely dots from this distance.

*[I know,] Saiban spoke to her thoughts without needing to be told, [What Ryuko said will happen when we kill them. I had hoped we’d have more time to decide what to do.]*

“What is there to decide? We *can’t* kill them, not knowing what’s gonna happen to their souls. And now we have to,” She concluded morosely.

*[Or someone else will instead. I guess ignorance really is bliss, before I wouldn’t have spared it a second thought. But Nonon, I **need** to get back in the fight. It’s already been to long.]*

“I know, I know,” Nonon said, but yet indecision still paralyzed her. The details of what Ryuko had told her, the being so large it overshadowed space itself with its endless gaping mouths, she had no answer for that. “How will we forgive ourselves if we go down there?”

~ “Nonon” ~ A call from Shiro on her earpiece, ~ “*There’s a second wave from the west, heading towards a residential district! From your position you’ll get there faster than us.*” ~

Residential district.

Nonon and Saiban weighed the stakes, and found a way.

“Well, in for a penny...”

Down on the streets, the REVOCS kill squads were methodical. One-stars lead by two-star squad leaders, every living thing they saw they shot. Man, woman, stray dog, child. Every door was kicked in, every building rendered lifeless. Their orders were clear. Do as much damage to the enemy ability to fight as possible, both in their military gear and their will to go on. A pile of dead civilians would go a long way towards the latter.

On a nearly deserted street, two distant shapes. A woman and a small boy. They were pounding on a row-house door, but it was already locked tight. On to the next, with no better luck. But they heard the shout from a squad leader and turned to see him pointing at them in the distance. The other shadows in the snowy fog pointed their guns at them, and the woman covered her son’s eyes and waited for the inevitable –

When in an instant a deafening *\*FOOOSH\** and a wave of golden light churn the snow into a blizzard. When it cleared, the squad leader fell, bisected. Next to his corpse stood a diminutive figure with pink hair, glittering emerald coattails, and a warm glow washing out from her. And in her hand, a naginata drenched in blood.

“Hello boys,” Nonon hissed, face set in a grim smile. “Looks like it’s time I sent you to your god. I gotta warn you though... *He’s hungry.*”

# A Day to Remember

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February 2068

~~~~~

“Hellooo, you in there?” Mako shouted as she rapped noisily on the door to Satsuki’s dressing room, “You decent?”. Not waiting for an answer, she barged in with a great bustling of her bridesmaid outfit. Satsuki was kneeling in front of a floor to ceiling mirror, carefully fitting an ornate headdress with rows of golden beads around the intricate and silky-smooth bun she’d tucked her hair into. She couldn’t turn her head much, but she beamed at Mako as she entered. “How ya doin’?” Mako asked softly, as though Satsuki’s temper was vulnerable to the slightest provocation.

“Mako!” Satsuki exclaimed “I’m doing well, very well. Just right now it’s nice being in here. You know, calming,” She held one of her hands flat in illustration. “I appreciate you keeping everyone out.”

“Oh I know, Nonon kept badgering me to let her see you, but I said, ‘You’ll get a chance before the ceremony, not like she’s going anywhere’. ‘Sides I think she’s having fun greeting the early arrivals to the reception.”

“There’s already early arrivals?” Satsuki sighed, “And here I hoped that moving from The Monument would make this less of a big event.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep ‘em out of your hair. You just stay focused – in a couple of hours you’re gonna be Mrs. Satsuki Matoi – AAH! I’m so excited for you!” Mako shouted as she flung herself around Satsuki. Satsuki chuckled to herself, thinking, *then how do you expect I feel?* as her whole chest rose as though it was going to explode. “Ooh, hey this is really silky,” Mako abruptly said, rubbing her hands and eventually her cheek on Satsuki’s kimono.

“Pardon me, Madam Princess, but if you would please wait one moment. Your curiosity shall shortly cause this incomplete ensemble to slip off the Royal Consort quite unbecomingly!” A short, portly man with a wide, lively face bustled in from a side room behind them. This was Satsuki’s fashion designer. Considering that her wedding outfit was meant to be a surprise to Ryuko (this was a break with tradition, but one Satsuki insisted on) hiring him was a necessity, they couldn’t just shift Ryuko’s life-fibers into a kimono even though Satsuki kept them on as her underclothes. Satsuki had done her research, as ever – he was one of the world’s most accomplished designers, and she’d heard Ryuko mention that she was a fan of his work on several occasions. He was more than capable of meeting Ryuko’s exacting and often gaudy standards. In his hands he had a small box of thin ties and belts. “I have just a few more pieces to attach, then you will be free to fondle and prod to your hearts content,” He hummed, setting right to work even as Mako leapt to the side.

“Oh! Hehe, sorry!” She giggled sheepishly. “Hey, um, by the way I did have something to ask you-.”

“Is it if I knew that Ryuko has a surprise planned for our honeymoon? Because yes, I’m aware. She was not able to slip by me this time,” Satsuki answered, back at work preparing her hair.

“Phew, that’s a relief! But how’d you know?” Mako said.

“Mako, please. When I see several hundred million yen disappear from my bank account, of course I investigate where it went. And when my accountant is being vague on the details and lacks a good alibi against his own embezzlement, then I have to conclude someone told him not to tell me. And besides all that, I did tell her she could pick the destination,” Satsuki explained.

“Oh, I see,” Mako said, feeling a little foolish. Satsuki was so clever of course she’d figured it out.

“I have a surprise for her too, don’t worry.”

“Really? What is it?”

Satsuki smiled smugly, “Oh, it’s not exactly something you can touch. But I have a feeling she’ll love it all the same.”

~~~~~

Outside, Ryuko distracted herself from the momentous events about to befall her in a very different way – shadow boxing. She stood on the patio behind the main building of the Fushimi Inari shrine in Kyoto, the recently rebuilt historic shrine which she’d chosen as the new, more intimate and traditional location for her wedding. The building behind her and the guardrail between her and the tree lined pond might have been new, but the stones beneath her feet were worn smooth by generations of worshippers and sightseers. She bounded back and forth, sleeves flowing back and forth with punches only visible to the human eye as blurs.

To even further her focus she blasted music at a near deafening volume. An eclectic mix of power metal and pop music, anything was acceptable so long as it tore by at a maximum of tempo and noise. She insisted on wearing bulky over-ear headphones; anything else was unbearably tinny and artificial to her supersensitive ears (and even this top-of-the line model was only barely acceptable). So Ryuko used a weave of prehensile life-fibers to hold it in place and closed her eyes as she battled hordes of invisible enemies.

One she worked through a basic progression of punches, wearing down his defenses, developing an opening, exploiting it with a gut punch and a finishing blow to the head. Then another one behind her – him she stunned with a high kick to the face, then snaked her foot behind him and with a twist of her body dropped him to the ground, where a quick succession of punches to the head finished him off. And then yet another, and maybe this one has a sword, brandishing it above his head as he leaps, so Ryuko meets him with a rising punch and then quickly slides her hand to guide his wrists to the ground. Only he manages to keep his grip and is back up and moving in an instant. In her imagination Ryuko could play at fighting enemies that demanded the full extent of her speed, and for a while it was just them and her and the cobblestones.

And a small, slight built woman rounding the corner behind her.

Ryuko hastily skidded to a stop, dropping her headphones to rest on her neck and opening her eyes just in time to see Haruka rounding the corner towards her.

*Ah crap*, Ryuko thought as Haruka, just as meek looking as ever with her perpetually tired eyes, briefly blanched with terror but then pieced her courage together and approached Ryuko. *When I told her she could write an article about the wedding, I didn't really think about what that meant. But be chill Ryuko, lots of people have to see their ex-girlfriends around and most of them make it work fine. Besides, compared to last time I saw her this'll be a friendly chat basically no matter what.*

"Betcha didn't expect to find me out here, huh?" Ryuko asked, hoping that Haruka didn't notice her shadowboxing and coolly strolling over to the railing by the pond and leaning on it.

"No... I was told you were in your dressing room with Mako," Haruka said.

"Oh, Mako is *everywhere* today. I just wanted some fresh air," Ryuko said, motioning in what she hoped was a friendly way for Haruka to join her. Haruka still looked like she thought Ryuko might kill her at any minute, the sheer terror of their last encounter hadn't fully worn off. Which is why it was more impressive to Ryuko that she mimicked her casual leaning posture even despite the determined set of her face. "Everything okay?" Ryuko asked.

"Huh? Oh, y-yes. Er, I wanted to thank you actually, for letting me write an article about your wedding."

"Well, you have kinda become the reporter with the inside scoop on all our lives, what was I gonna do?" Ryuko said, and then worried that sounded a little too begrudging said, "Do other journalists and paparazzi types ever getting pissed off about that? Y'know, say you get favoritism cuz we used to date?"

Haruka answered hesitantly, "Yes, quite a lot actually. I just tell them 'no, it's actually because Rei almost dropped a giant monster on me and broke my bike and she felt bad.'"

Ryuko blinked, "Uh, is that a joke or..."

"Well yes, but it also did really happen," Haruka answered, and Ryuko cracked a smile and felt the tension give way just a little.

"I didn't know you rode, by the way. What kinda bike was it?" She asked, thinking back fondly to the time when she'd first taught Haruka to ride a motorcycle.

"Oh, that old one was just a crappy old moped I got used," Haruka said. "I bought a new one though. It's a Yamaha-Tori."

Ryuko's response was enthusiastic, "Ooh! Is it the new Razor model?"

"Yup! Here, I've got a picture," Haruka smiled as she whipped out her phone and began scrolling. In no time at all they were deep in geeking out, briefly and blissfully unaware of the impending wedding and the brutal waves of nervous anticipation that had been driving Ryuko crazy all morning. *I guess we did date for a good long while*, Ryuko thought, *even if that was a bad idea we couldn't have done it if we didn't get along*. Eventually Haruka asked, "Do you still have Osu?"

"Oh yeah, she's still in *peak* condition. Especially considering I'm too busy to ride 'er most days," Ryuko grumbled.

“That’s right I heard you were at the southern front last week,” Haruka said thoughtfully, “They said on the news that you and Satsuki slaughtered the entire enemy army on the bridge in Nanjing, is that true?”

“No! God no!” Ryuko was emphatic, “I’d never do something like that. No, we lured them out and then Tsumugu and Aikuro bombed their camp and stole their food reserves, and as soon as they saw that the rank and file guys who weren’t true believers handed their leaders over to us. Freakin’ journos, they’re always trying to overdramatize everything.”

“Well it isn’t entirely their fault though, is it? I mean, they’re stuck where its safe in *your* camp, right?” Haruka asked.

“Sure but – ohhh no, you’re seriously bringing *that* up now? How many ways can I say, ‘no fucking way’ to you?” Ryuko soured as she saw where Haruka was going with this.

“Well why not? It’s a win-win. You want reporters in the combat zone who won’t sensationalize anything, I want to push my work to the next level -,” Haruka, suddenly animated, pushed on.

“- What, is the whole ‘meek maiden’ thing just an act for you? Don’t tell me you came over just to ask about this,” Ryuko said, wheeling on Haruka in exasperation, but the wind got taken out of that when Haruka cringed back in fright. It wasn’t just an act, but more that she’d forgotten herself in their lively conversation. Forgotten to be afraid of Ryuko, how could she be?

“No! No, I swear,” She held up her hands, and when Ryuko relented she said, “I just take this really seriously.”

“Really. I figured, y’know, in light of recent events... things you’ve learned...”

Haruka shook her head vigorously, “No, no not at all. It doesn’t matter, you’re still the most influential person to history maybe ever, and I *will* be your biographer.”

“And it doesn’t bother you, being here today? Y’know, *who* I’m marrying? There really isn’t a part of you that’s just thinking about how it should be you?” Ryuko asked. *In ordinary circumstances, I think the response to expect would be something like ‘get over yourself, you aren’t that big a deal’.*

“I always knew you and I weren’t going to last,” Haruka answered with a shrug. “I thought I told you that.”

“Oh yeah, you did pick out that Satsuki and I had, like, something going on all the way back then, didn’t you?” Ryuko said, not thrilled to recall that uncomfortable evening.

And Haruka nodded quietly and said, “Um, if I may, I’ve been wondering. Why didn’t you go with her right then? Why, i-if that were true, did you spend almost a year dating Rei?”

*Because I’m an idiot.* Ryuko scratched her head and said, “Ahh, well, if I’m being honest... I didn’t really see that you were right. I didn’t see it in Satsuki because – well you know why – but also because I thought we just had a bond because of all the shit we went through together, and I was just being a little bit of a perv. And when she finally did tell me I was already with Rei, so we both knew I couldn’t return her feelings. She just did it because she felt guilty, she

didn't think I'd... y'know, feel the same way. And also because I'm an idiot." She smiled self-consciously and said, "I like to think it would be sweet if not for the whole... other side."

"Yeah..." Haruka said absently, hastily typing that out on her phone, "That is kinda sweet. You don't mind if I use that, do you? With the sensitive parts out, obviously. I think readers would appreciate a full narrative of your relationship."

"Sure, might as well," Ryuko said. Haruka nodded, happy to at least get that out of the conversation. "Well, uh, I'll see you at the reception I guess."

"Yes. Or er, probably a bit sooner since I'll be helping with the pictures after the ceremony is over."

"Ah, cool," Ryuko said, and then just as Haruka turned to walk away, "Hey, one last thing. I know this is probably the *worst* time imaginable to, y'know, relitigate our whole relationship. But it's fucked up that when I broke up with you, I made it like *you* had done something wrong. That was a total bitch move on my part, and I'm sorry – bad timing or not I had to apologize."

That caught Haruka off guard, but she smiled more warmly than she had the entire time because that – totally blunt and unguarded, tripping over herself in a misguided effort to do the right thing – was a pitch perfect Ryuko move. She said, "Yeah, it is a pretty bad time. But it's okay, really."

"You sure? I think the appropriate reaction to that would be to call me an asshole, or a bitch, or a cunt, or something more creative," Ryuko said.

"Yeah, probably," Haruka shrugged, "But that's not how I feel. And besides, it's your wedding day. You've got other stuff to worry about than me," And to Ryuko's utter shock, she scurried up and planted a quick kiss on her cheek.

"Wha – hey!" Ryuko protested, but Haruka was already backing away.

"Go on, have fun! The happier you are the more readers I get!" Haruka joked, and then took her exit back the way she came.

*Huh, she really is a remarkable girl,* Ryuko thought, still not entirely sure if Haruka had been messing with her the whole time or if they really had patched up some kind of friendship in the span of fifteen minutes, *funny I'm only realizing that now.*

But she was also right, Ryuko did have bigger things to worry about today, and reminiscing on past girlfriends only reminded her that – holy shit – by the end of today she'd be *married*. It was almost scary how happy that made her, how happy she was going to be. And yet every time she looked at the clock the seconds dragged by *so slowly*. How was it she could spend years in the spirit world with Senketsu like it was nothing but just a couple more hours made her want to pull her hair and shout "*don't make me wait, not now that I'm so close!*" She'd actually considered going someplace quiet and popping over to the other side, letting her inert body wait out the time while she and Senketsu chatted. Only problem was that Mako might need her for something. So all she could do was pace around the shrine and try in vain to distract herself.

However, as she began her pacing, she came upon another great distraction: Aikuro. He too was seeking sanctuary from the rush of activity going on inside the main hall where the first



stage of the ceremony would be held, and he waved when he saw her coming and cut off the conversation he was having with Nekketsu. She – in direct opposition to Aikuro – was probably the quietest of the kamui and most content with letting him do the talking, but Ryuko could feel from her aura that she was captured by the spirit of the day, thrilled to be witnessing her creator's union with her one true love. But also self-aware enough to know that Aikuro thought that was way too sappy and that he had a point.

“Well, if it isn't the lady of the hour? I guess even you can't take Mako after a certain point, huh?” He asked.

Ryuko shook her head and sat down next to him on the steps of a smaller sub-building. “Nah, it ain't her, it's all this damn waiting. Oh hey, you'll never guess who I just saw.”

“Your ex?”

“How did you –,”

“Oh, she just passed by and said hi and took a quote from me for her article. It's better having just her than all the paparazzi you usually draw,” He said, leaning back in his usual relaxed way.

“Ahh, there'll be plenty of them when we go down to the city park for the reception,” Ryuko said, motioning out over Kyoto's skyline stretching before them. The ancient cultural capital of precolonial Japan was like many others a city under refurbishment after both the dilapidation of the Kiryuin reign and the battles of the Tri-City Raid Trip and Life-Fiber War. But now, enhanced by the sun of an early warm spell and the new buds forming on the trees, it was beginning to regain some of its former splendor.

When the decision to switch the wedding from mass public spectacle to something more private was made, going as traditional as possible with it was the obvious next step. This was about as traditional as it could get, and the more Ryuko thought about that the more she liked it. This was much more... grounded. Here they could get married not as a queen and her consort, but as two people, in a way passed down and developed over countless generations.

“Hmm. So you say you're sick of the waiting?” Aikuro asked.

“Oh my god, don't get me started,” She groaned, “It's like, you ever have one of those where you're looking forward to something so much you can't even think about what comes after? That's me with this and the honeymoon. It's like this – this huge wall I'm about to slam into and I thought it would get better now that it's almost here, but it *definitely* did not. It's just *ugh*, I can't deal with it anymore!”

Aikuro, not especially bothered, laughed and said, “You've got the jitters, what did you expect? You aren't the first, and you won't be the last either, if that makes you feel any better. I mean, you and Satsuki have had a whole story going on together since basically the moment you met each other, I probably know that better than anyone. And now this is the culmination of it. At least that's how society generally has you think about marriage.”

“I can tell you don't agree,” Ryuko said.

“No, I don't,” Aikuro said, “I don't think it's for me. But even besides that, I mean come on you're twenty-two. I seriously hope you don't see this as the end point.”

“No, no definitely not! It’s more like, whatever happens after this I don’t need to worry about, because it’ll work out fine. So, what do you think, you’ve probably gone to a few weddings, what do they usually do get through the wait?”

“Well, get ready and stuff. Which, by the way you’re looking a little less dolled up than I was expecting,” Aikuro gestured to Ryuko’s clothes, which were still in their casual form.

“What, this? Oh, no I can make the switch right away,” Ryuko snapped her fingers and with a modest glow her clothes immediately shifted into a traditional wedding kimono and outer cloak, shimmering white with red highlights and patterns of flowing lines.

“Riiight, so I guess getting ready’s not really gonna work for ya,” Aikuro concluded with a chuckle.

Ryuko shifted back to her casual form and said, “No... man I do kinda wish we’d gone Tsumugu and Kinue’s route and just gone down to the courthouse and then had a little low-key party at the house.”

“Nah, I don’t really buy that. That wouldn’t be right for you and *definitely* not for Satsuki.”

“Heh, yeah you’re right. She’d kill me if after all this time we didn’t make a big deal out of it,” Ryuko laughed fondly.

When Aikuro spoke again he said, “So I heard for Mako you’re planning something big for the honeymoon. Care to let me in on the secret?”

“Wha – in your dreams!” Ryuko exclaimed.

“Oho, well from that response I can *infer*...” Aikuro raised an eyebrow with a mocking grin.

“Oh-my-god fuck right the hell off you weirdo!” Was Ryuko’s response, “I swear, of all the pervs I know you’re the worst.”

*[You should really try to work on that, you know]*

“No, not the worst, just the most consistent,” Aikuro laughed, “I know my brand, what can I say?”

Harassing jokes or not, they still sat there talking for nearly two hours more until finally, at long last, it was time.

“Well,” Aikuro said as he stood, “It’s your big moment. I hope you’re not like, nervous or anything, your job in this isn’t that hard at least compared to Mako’s. And, uh, thanks for including me in the private ceremony even though I’m not really a member of your immediate family.”

“Dude,” Ryuko was suddenly very serious, “You are. Hell, I wouldn’t even be here without you. In fact, um, thanks for kinda introducing me to Satsuki, in a way.”

Aikuro laughed out loud at that, “Hah! You know if after your first big fight someone told me you’d wind up getting married someday, I honestly might have said ‘yeah, that tracks’.”

~~~~~

The time had finally come. As was customary, they would approach the alter together and so would meet in the hallway between their dressing rooms and proceed flanked by a small party of

their immediate family. Satsuki had finally finished preparing herself and was quite satisfied with the outcome. The delicate white kimono and cloak with all its intricate layers only highlighted the boldness of her eyes and hair, only drew the eye to the graceful beauty of her every movement. This, she decided, was probably the best she'd ever looked. Like a princess. She couldn't wait until Ryuko saw her, almost as much as she couldn't wait to see Ryuko, even half a day's absence was painful.

*I hope this is how she thinks of me, Satsuki thought, Oh who am I kidding, of course the first thing that pops into her head has to be me wearing Junketsu. Well, at least I can add this to her repertoire.* She was consumed by a foolish, immature kind of elation, and she wasn't afraid to feel it. *Satsuki Matoi. My wife, Ryuko.* The words kept rolling around in her mind, giving her a little thrill each time. She was so preoccupied by the thought that she was a little surprised when the door opened a Soroi quickly stepped in.

"Soroi!" She beamed at him, and of course he smiled tenderly back, clasping his hands together in satisfaction.

"Satsuki, are you ready?"

"Very."

"Well, I must say you look lovely," Soroi gave her a hug and then held her at arm's length to admire her with more than a little pride.

"Thank you. I was just thinking in fact that this was the most conventionally beautiful I've ever made myself look."

"I hardly think you need rely on convention," He said, turning to examine the scattered papers laying out the ritual script for the proceedings. "And have you fully memorized the prayers, vows, other lines?"

"Yes," She said with a little eye roll, "Believe me, when it comes to liturgical accuracy I am not the one you should be concerned about."

"She's a very lucky woman," Soroi said, then went on with a sigh, "Although I must admit, I feel a little sad. I think it's clear that you really will no longer require my services."

Satsuki hum chuckled, "Maybe. I might keep you around anyway though. And who knows, I may have reason to reinstate when you have some grandkids to babysit."

"*Grandkids!* You mean –," Soroi was lost for words, but really he didn't need to say anything. "I see. I... always hoped you saw me that way."

"Soroi-," Whatever more Satsuki might have said was cut off as she became choked up and. "Oh dear," She murmured as she felt herself tearing up. But as she reached for a tissue Soroi was swifter with a handkerchief.

"Here, you'll smudge you makeup if you do it yourself," He said, and for a brief silent moment Satsuki allowed her father-in-all-but-name to wipe a few happy tears away. Then there was a knock at the door. "Ah, they're ready."

Satsuki barely had time to process what was happening as she positioned herself right in front of the door and in perfect sync both it and the door to Ryuko's dressing room – right across the hall – swung open. And there she was.

In retrospect maybe Ryuko and Satsuki were becoming a little too dependent on each other, because seeing each other in a normal situation after being apart all morning would already have been a huge relief. But this? It was *transporting*. This still, vibrantly colored hall lit in a fuzzy and multicolored glow was a magical place, a celestial plane so far above the everyday.

Ryuko audibly gulped as they stepped forward and took each other's hands, so struck and *intimidated* by her beauty, by the realization that *she's mine*. Satsuki had only her well honed composure to thank for not doing the same.

"Uh, hey," Ryuko said softly, distracted from the task at hand by staring into Satsuki's eyes.

Satsuki grinned and whispered, "You're not supposed to talk at this part."

"Oup!" Ryuko squeaked in embarrassment, and gave Satsuki's hand a squeeze as they turned, with Barazo and Sukuyo behind Ryuko and Soroi behind Satsuki, and as one approached the altar.

~~~~~

This ritual was a solemn affair, sacred in spirit if open to some modification in form and was only attended by a select few. That being their immediate families, such as they were. On Ryuko's side there sat Tsumugu and Aoi, Aikuro, and Mataro, and as they approached Barazo and Sukuyo took their seats next to their son with wet eyes. On the other side, Satsuki's former elites were arrayed and Soroi took his seat with Ira, Uzu, Houka and Shiro.

The altar itself was resplendent with gilt wood carvings, the lanterns with their prayers for luck and plenty scrawled across them, delicate inlaid porcelain statues, and more than a few origami cranes folded from silver-lined parchment. At it, along with the modestly dressed kannushi priest, were Mako and Nonon, wearing matching bridesmaids' outfits (or in Nonon's case the outer layer over Saiban).

Indeed the only member of their little family not in attendance was Rei – not for her benefit or the happy couple's, but for everyone else's since though they had largely forgiven her it still would've felt a little weird. Not that she minded, she was happy to keep watch over the hordes of well wishers waiting at the reception – and yeah, it woulda been a little weird.

The whole thing was a blur for both Ryuko and Satsuki. They said the prayers, tilted their heads so Mako and Nonon could place the rosary necklaces around them, and before they knew it their bridesmaids were presenting them with the san-san-kudo sake. Three cups of increasing size from which they each sipped three times. This was one of the most important rites in the entire ceremony but Satsuki found herself struggling not to laugh when Ryuko raised her eyes to make a goofy little "bottoms up!" face so swiftly that nobody but her even noticed it. It felt like no time at all had passed, even though in reality the prayers had drawn on for nearly an hour of careful choreography.

But that was only the first phase, and before the second there came the procession. The Fushimini Inari was more than just a single shrine, its complex dotted a wooded mountainside on

the east border of Kyoto. Paths lined with thousands of torii gates wound up between the trees to the inner shrine, the true inner sanctum of its worship. In a solemn, peacefully focused procession with the priest at the head, Ryuko and Satsuki right behind, and the rest trailing in pairs, they ascended with occasional pauses for further prayers – stages in the journey. The brilliant orange of the Torii, the green speckles of budding leaves, the patchy blue of the sky, and the eclectic shades of the kamui were bursts of color amidst a clean, surreally grey landscape.

And the aura from the kamui was so powerful. An invisibly roaring pyre, feeding off itself. Ryuko promised herself she wouldn't cry from feeling how they'd put all their misgivings aside for her, and now with unanimity knew that yes, this was the way things should be. But it was hard. They washed over her so powerfully she had to believe that even the humans could feel it too. Satsuki certainly seemed to.

When at last they crested the peak of Inari, it was to arrive in the dense forest of statues of worship mounds around Ichinomine, the highest point in the complex. Stone and carvings packed together, walls to a maze. Some so old and moss encrusted their text had long since faded, others freshly cut and donated just in time for this ceremony. This was what had so captured Satsuki when Mako had shown her the list of possible venues. There was something here, something old, a power that didn't need a name, accumulated over the centuries. This place was beloved by the Earth.

The building in the center had been enlarged for the refurbishment, but the central awning still lay within, and it was there that the final vows were exchanged. Like the earlier prayers these were traditional, formalized, and differed from their western counterpart. Not a series of questions asked by the priest and answered with a simple "yes", but oaths sworn by them both,

Satsuki began,

"This woman who I marry,

No matter health or fortune,

I will love, respect, console, and support in all things,

Until death, with total fidelity,

So I swear."

And then Ryuko, summoning the words with a deep breath,

"This woman who I marry,

No matter health or fortune,

I will love, respect, console, and support in all things,

Always and forever, with total fidelity,

So I swear."

And as she finished her lines, the realization smacked her dead in the face. That was *it!* With those simple words, she'd bound herself to Satsuki forever.

Well, almost, there was just one last ritual. The exchange of clothing. And this was one of the reasons Ryuko was really glad they went with a traditional Shinto wedding. Western wedding dresses would just... not suit either of them, for obvious reason. But this, the symbolic presentation of new garments, it was perfect for her.

Plus, it was just fun. Why not showboat a little?

In a truly traditional wedding, this would take the form of a kimono from groom to bride. But with two brides, someone had to take the lead. So Satsuki undid the belts of her cloak and kimono, leaving only a short shirt and underwear created from Ryuko's life-fibers (not like anyone there hadn't seen her wear much less). And Ryuko stepped up and starting from her neck wove her hands around Satsuki's body in fluid graceful motions, drawing a new form in the air around her with tiny flickers of her fingers. A perfect recreation of the dress she'd made for her coronation, with its brilliant, flowing blues and patches of red like flower petals in a stream.

Satsuki shivered and, she couldn't stay so serious anymore, laughed ticklishly at the sensation. She didn't know if she'd ever get over how magical that felt. Not that there was any reason to.

And now Ryuko's. This was much simpler; all Satsuki did was lift her cloak off Ryuko's shoulders and swing it off of her. And in the mere moment it passed between her and their modest audience it consumed itself and vanished into her hands, and behind it Ryuko's clothes stretched in glowing lines to become her royal garb. And now they regarded each other, with huge, unbridled grins.

"And now, in the sight of the gods, I pronounce you wedded."

They couldn't contain themselves anymore. "Haha!" Ryuko burst as she leapt at Satsuki and wasted not a moment at all in kissing her. Of course, if she thought Satsuki wouldn't take advantage of the imbalance caused by her feminine leg kick she was badly mistaken, and abandoning all modesty she wrapped her arms around Ryuko and leaned, dipping her down so far that she engaged a tiny bit of her levitation to keep herself level. And they could just *do* this! Hell, they were being applauded for it!

"WOOOHOOO!" Mako shouted and then, realizing that wasn't appropriate in a holy place, ran out onto the porch and tried again "WOOHOOOOOO!!!"

"Mako, what are you – hey!" Ryuko exclaimed as she and Satsuki were hoisted triumphant on the shoulders of a whole scrum – from Ira to Mataro, everyone with enough shoulder width and a good enough back to help. Sukuyo, Soroi, and Nonon could only follow as they tore out into the open air, all shouting and laughing at once, only to skid to a halt.

"Okay, on my mark, ready?" Aikuro asked, and when they all nodded, "Three, two, one, hup!"

And as one they hurled the happy couple high into the air with a great, cathartic cheer (a solid half of which was just from finally finishing the ceremony and seeing Mako's final little joke to fruition). They spun at a surprising height, hanging in the air just long enough to realized they were going down, and with a deft move Ryuko manage to catch Satsuki and slam down to the ground, perfectly poised.

“You guys are insane!” She laughed, and then after another deep kiss from Satsuki settled her down and added her own voice to the jubilation, “WOOOOO!”

And to everyone’s surprise, Satsuki shouted nearly as loud, “WOOOOOOO!” Such a sheer, unbridled noise even Ryuko couldn’t have expected, but how could Satsuki stop herself? The cool, clear air in her lungs couldn’t be denied. She squeezed Ryuko’s hand and said, “Doesn’t it feel wonderful, Ryuko? Don’t you feel free?”

“Yeah. I know exactly what you mean Sats.” Ryuko was used to the tired old joke of marriage as a “ball and chain”, a cold hard certainty weighing you down, limiting what you could be. But it didn’t feel like that at all. Now there could be no more worrying, no more fear that something could come between them. And with that a great weight was lifting, setting their hearts to soar refreshed into the winter sky. Together, there was nothing they couldn’t do.

*Senketsu, I have so much to tell you,* Ryuko thought. But a part of her couldn’t help but feel a fearsome satisfaction, knowing that Ragyo, still trapped within her, had witnessed all of that. Everything she could have wanted, if only she weren’t broken. *I win, always and forever.*

~~~~~

The reception, of course, had spun out of all scope and proportion. The wisdom of choosing a day which was already a national holiday was that the crowds of people out enjoying the unseasonable warmth weren’t unexpected, and they weren’t exactly whipped into a frenzy by Ryuko’s presence. Indeed, the corded velvet rope that had been used to block off their reserved pavilion went largely unmolested even though it would’ve been easy to jump. People kept a respectful distance, and of course they did. Leave the happy couple to their jubilations.

And they were jubilant. Presiding over the guest of honor table they looked every bit queens on their throne. And the presiding came easier than usual – Ryuko usually got a little worn out after the fiftieth or so dignitary, but not today. Everybody was a new friend, everybody had something interesting to say. But then it wasn’t like the entire party was just about lining up to speak to them, and the general festivities – dancing, drinking, feasting – all went on into the early evening and would continue well beyond.

“So,” Aikuro started, sliding into his seat at the guest of honor table with a refill of Satsuki’s favorite eel sashimi (well, almost her favorite, the best kind still banned due to their endangerment). “Here’s something I’ve been wondering about. Which do you think is what happened – did Satsuki kind of Satsuki-ize Ryuko? Or did Ryuko Ryuko-ize Satsuki.”

“Huh, well that’s simple,” Tsumugu said, “Satsuki’s had much more influence. I mean look at her,” He pointed to Ryuko, who conversing in nearly fluent Chinese with a newly appointed governor from the mainland conquests. “When I met Ryuko, she was a rebel without a cause. Everyone was her enemy if they even looked at her funny and she skated by on luck and strength. Now look. Satsuki showed her that she can be much more than that.”

“What? No, no way. Huh - Oh, thanks sweetie,” Ira said between efforts to dab steak sauce off his chin from the place Mako was pointing to. “Just ask yourself this, could you ever have pictured Satsuki yelling ‘woohoo’ like that? I didn’t even know her voice had that... er...”

“Register?” Nonon grunted.

“Yes, register, right,” Ira said, “I think that alone seals it for me.”

“What, seriously?” Uzu said lazily, “Nah, they ain’t different at all. It’s just Satsuki has more chances to goof off and Ryuko more to be serious. Right Nonon?”

“Yeah I guess,” Nonon said, just as unenthusiastically.

“No no, that’s *totally* it,” Mako said.

And Uzu just motioned at her and said, “See? Take it from her then.”

“Yeah uh, what’s up with you guys, by the way?” Aikuro asked, “You seem dead beat.”

It was true, almost the moment the wedding ceremony was over both Uzu and Nonon had slumped so much they lost about half their height. And the dark circles under their eyes were hard to miss.

“War”

“War,” They answered simultaneously, then Nonon said, “What’d you expect?” Since the Christmas Day attack, Nonon had been driving the troops hard through some densely fortified territory. In for a penny, in for a pound, she would not stop now until the enemy was crushed. The toll of that strategy was obvious though.

A burst of new energy was added as Shiro and Houka returned from the bar laden with a other round of drinks. “The king of beer has returned!” Shiro declared in a strident tone.

“No way you’re the ‘king of beer’!” Mako protested, “More like... the jester of hard seltzer – phehehehe!”

Shiro was unfazed and said, “Oh let me dream for one night. So, what’re we talking about?”

“We were just discussing the dynamics of our fearless leaders’ marriage,” Tsumugu informed him, “And who we think influenced the other more.”

“Oho! Now that’s a question! There’s a couple factors to consider and – oh shit! Satsuki’s talking to some of the guys from the research complex right now!”

“Shiro, restrain yourself,” Houka said in mostly sardonic warning.

“Yeah, I know, but they’re gonna shit themselves when they hear!” And almost as soon as he’d unloaded the drinks he was off again.

“Huh, he’s in a good mood,” Uzu commented, and then, “Holy shit! He’s in a *good mood!*” He’d suddenly realized what that meant.

Houka nodded with a smile and an eye roll, “About. damn. time. Reminds me, we’ve been working on some new dance moves I haven’t had a chance to show you,” He said to Nonon, before noticing her exhausted state, “Er, if you’re up for it.”

“Huh? Oh, sure, sure,” She murmured.

At the head of the table, the stream of well wishers had died down and had resulted, as ever, in a huge pile of gifts. It was time for dinner, so their guests were occupied, but neither of



them felt particularly hungry.

“Hey Sats,” Ryuko said softly, “That’s a pretty nice wide-open field over there. Would be a shame if someone put several hundred sword-slashes in it.”

“Ryuko!” Satsuki, just a bit tipsy, gasped loudly, “You can’t seriously be challenging me to a duel on our wedding night! The impropriety of it!”

“What? C’mon, be improper with me then! It’s our night, who’s gonna stop us?”

“O-o-oh! Wait!” Mako shouted, leaping to her feet. “Wait just a minute! You should maybe open the present from me and Ira first.”

Not wasting a second, Ryuko did. Buried at the bottom of the pile was a huge metal case with a surprisingly cutesy tag on it. She cracked it open.

Swords. Dozens, no, more than a hundred of them. Katanas, No Dachi, western longswords, every conceivable form.

“Tada!” Mako shouted.

“Compliments of the Gamagoori family,” Ira said proudly. Ryuko took one, tested the edge. The alloy was shockingly strong and lacking in flexibility. The purpose was clear. These were practice weapons for superhumans.

“Ohohoho, maaaaaan,” Ryuko chuckled to herself, before producing a katana from the pile and offering it to Satsuki hilt first. “Satsuki, may I have this dance?”

Satsuki grinned, so much so that several onlookers gasped because they could see *teeth*!

“It would be my pleasure.”

By the time Shiro returned from bragging to the other scientists about the completion of his human hybrid project, the music was punctuated by the slamming noises as two bolts of light, one red and one blue, tore across the field at speeds only Houka with his kamui enhanced senses could keep up with. The brilliant lights that were Ryuko and Satsuki had gathered many onlookers, though not a single one could fully comprehend the speed at which they fought.

“I really can’t believe this,” Nonon groaned, “It’s so... typical. Their wedding night and this is what they want to do with it?”

“You kidding?” Shiro chortled, “This is great! Dinner and a show! Hey, I call fighting the winner!”

In the end, Ryuko won that bout. She beat Shiro too (to be fair he was a bit drunk). Eventually though Uzu got a little sick of her gloating and demonstrated why he was considered the greatest swordsman in the world. And the swiftly lost his winning streak when he and Nonon bailed out of sheer exhaustion.

In the end, alcohol tolerance alone lead to Aikuro being declared the last man standing sometime well after midnight.

## Chapter End Notes

Uploaded just a bit after midnight on 1/7/2021. Yesterday was a weird one if you lived in the US. I hope reading this gave you some degree of positivity in light of that . I enjoyed writing it, and researching Japanese wedding traditions and trying to create something that felt plausible and also fitting to Ryuko and Satsuki. If you know anything about this you'll see I took some slight liberties, but this is taking place in the future so assume that culture has changed a bit.

# Time Travel

## Chapter Summary

Except it's not actually time travel.

There's a couple instances in this chapter where names are arranged the way Japanese actually works, with the surname first, rather than the anglicized version I use. I like to imagine that this is because the colloquial version of Japanese used in the 2060s has evolved and become anglicized since the present, and that those instances are hearkening back to a more proper form of the language. Just don't get confused by that.

February 2068

~~~~~

The only part of Ryuko and Satsuki's wedding that seriously deviated from plan was the very ending, and when it happened it was hardly anyone's fault. The idea had been to do the typical thing with everyone seeing them off as they ran down the steps to their limo with the "just married" sign on the back, do the flower toss and wave goodbye before vanishing for a week. But this was meant to happen before the sun went down, an opportunity which came and went as they presided over the impromptu kamui tournament they'd started.

It was only much, much later that they found themselves falling over each other into the limo, barely aware of anything but each other and the pounding drunkenness in their heads. The clothes melted off them as they tore off into the night.

Hardly anybody even realized they'd snuck off.

*I need to take this in,* Satsuki thought as the clothes melted off Ryuko's body beneath her and she, in a drunken swaying motion, seized her breasts with such force that Ryuko gasped and giggled. *Tonight's the one night I can really experience being young and wild. I'll see what it's like, even if I can't remember it after.*

As it happens, she did remember – hazily – every moment of the night before when she awoke early the next morning. She was in the bed cabin of a tiny private jet, and the sun reflecting off the patchy clouds gleamed bright in their window. She blinked and hazily turned away from it and felt the tiny motion of Ryuko's hands playing through her hair. Ryuko was sitting up slightly and had pulled Satsuki so she cradled Satsuki's head in her chest. She stared with bleary eyes at the rising sun and it looked to Satsuki like she was perfectly content.

*Ah, and sadly I feel about one step off from that,* Satsuki thought. "Ooughh," She moaned in a less than dignified way as the sunbeams seemed to beam themselves right through her eye and into the throbbing headache behind it. She turned further into Ryuko, trying to blot the hangover out with the soft warmth of her body. It did help.

“Heh, the dead have risen,” Ryuko chuckled softly. “How ya feeling?”

“Not... great... but it’s fine. I anticipated this might happen. And it was worth it,” She said, smiling up at Ryuko.

“I’ll say,” Was Ryuko’s response in a husky tone, “When we were boarding the plane and you threw me over your shoulder – *ohh my god!* Oh, here, this’ll help you kick the hangover,” Ryuko leaned over to the end table, where a miniature kitchenette complimented the cozy proportions of the bed cabin (the bed itself was the width of it, with only enough space for the kitchenette, a small wardrobe, and a sink alongside). She swiftly heated up a cup of tea in the microwave, holding it for Satsuki to drink because the simple ceramic cup got rather hot. “I made it before, but you were still out cold.”

Satsuki took a delicate sip and immediately recoiled with a sniff, “Oh my! That’s rather strong.”

Ryuko looked sheepish, “Eheheh, sorry! I maybe didn’t do it quite right.”

“No, no this is good. It’ll help me recuperate.” They sat in contented silence, watching the sky roll by over an endless expanse of dark, glinting morning ocean. “We’re going south, aren’t we?”

“What’d you think, I’d send us someplace cold? Nah, we’re getting close now,” Ryuko took that as her cue to – despite Satsuki’s gentle protests – get out of bed and head over to the sink. She washed her face and began applying makeup.

“That’s quite a lot of blush,” Satsuki commented between sips

Ryuko responded quickly, “Yup! I mean it’s just – uh – it’s just something I’m doing. You don’t have to or anythin’.”

Satsuki chuckled knowingly, “You’re really excited about this, aren’t you?” Ryuko looked up with a worried expression.

“Did Mako-,”

“- She tried, but I told her I didn’t want it spoiled. And I was already aware you had *some* kind of surprise planned. So, if this is part of it, then should I?”

“No, no in fact I think you’d be better with as little makeup as possible if you want,” Ryuko said. *Oh, okay then*, Satsuki nodded. “You just stay there and focus on feeling better. Just a little longer, and then the fun really starts.”

~~~~~

After a couple hours, the private jet began a smooth and untroubled descent to a small regional airport. Satsuki watched urgently out the window, trying to guess where they were. Warm subtropical oceans, lush coastal forest, white sandy beaches, and a tiny, stilted fishing village built over the ruins of a larger one swallowed by the rising sea level. By the time they landed Satsuki felt confident she had it.

“Ah, the Ryukyu Islands,” She declared, shouting into the rushing ocean breeze. Warm but far from balmy, the air felt crisp and invigorating and – despite Satsuki’s best efforts the night before – she was back at full capacity. “

It also helped that Ryuko’s enthusiasm was undeniable. She had big, stupid smile on her face, letting the wind whip her hair into a frenzy. “Kinda like the *Ryuko* islands, dontcha think?”

“Hardly, the entomological roots are completely dist – actually I’m sorry, no reason to get pedantic. Although in centuries past these islands harbored many pirates, exiles, and similar ‘free spirits’,” She gave Ryuko’s cheek an affectionate little box, “I think you would have fit in very well. So, uh, what exactly do we do now?” Satsuki asked, surveying the landing strip. Rather than taxi to the airport they’d just descended by stairs right onto the tarmac, with only a chainlink fence between them and the jungle. They were alone save for the pilots, who had gotten out to stretch their legs and were keeping a respectful distance. “There doesn’t seem to be any welcome party, nor – come to think of it – did I have the time to pack any luggage.”

“You won’t need any! And, uh, that’s our ride,” Ryuko, slightly more sheepishly, pointed out an open topped offroad SUV sitting unaccompanied by the start of a rugged path trailing downhill into the greenery. “Don’t worry, I know where we’re going.”

~~~~~

“Are you sure you know where we’re going?” Satsuki shouted over the continuous rumbling clunks of rocks flying under the car’s wheels. The path had only gotten narrower and more rugged, but Ryuko kept flying along at high speed with a fixated confidence.

“Huh!” She shouted back, and then, “Aha! There it is!” Through a clearing, Satsuki spotted a distant clutch of buildings surrounded by low stone walls and with what looked like a primitive cart path running through them. There were men milling around with what were unmistakably spears in their hands. With curved eaves, thatched roofs, and delicate paper walls they looked like something out of an earlier era. Satsuki was relieved that Ryuko wasn’t going to have to fly them out of an uncharted gulley someplace and dedicated herself to just taking in this odd sight.

In no time at all they were upon them, Ryuko skidding to a halt before the walls and hurrying out of the car. When Satsuki followed her, one of the men – and there was no doubt he really was armored and armed like a samurai castle guard, hurried over, leapt in the driver’s seat and tore off in the opposite direction. With a united *\*thud\** of feet moving in unison, the others snapped to attention in two blocks, respectfully opening up the central lane between them.

“Welcome, Lady Matoi!” They barked.

“What on Earth?” Satsuki murmured in confusion. So many of them, and they really did look the part of feudal warriors. Far from being simple cosplay, someone had taken to time to rub a little extra mud into their boots, fray the edges of their lacquered scales. And as she took everything in that care was only more obvious. Horses, bundles of kindling, a primitive well, there wasn’t a single sign of modern technology anywhere. Indeed, with the car gone there wasn’t a single thing to suggest it was the twenty-first century, and not half a millennium earlier.

“Ryuko?” Satsuki gasped as she realized what was going on.

“C’mon,” Ryuko whispered, squeezing her hand and leading her in a daze towards the main building, which appeared to be a kind of checkpoint or garrison. At the door an elderly man with an official seal embroidered on his kimono greeted them.

“Ahh, Lady Matoi, it is good to see that you have arrived safely. But you look weary from your journey, shall I direct you and your... companion towards our private quarters where you may change and make ready to proceed to your estate?”

*My estate? I must play along, I’m sure these private quarters are where Ryuko will explain it all to me,* she sharply concluded. “Yes, that would do nicely,” She answered in a polite, sophisticated tone.

Inside the changing room, Ryuko took a deep breath and said, “Allright, so far so good. Now, I’ll need your phone.”

“Oh, um, okay,” Satsuki obliged and watched it disappear into Ryuko’s pocket. “Do you ever plan on explaining what exactly is going on?”

“Huh? Oh, definitely, just one thing to do first.” Ryuko strode across the room, past the simple washbasin to a curtain which she flung open. Behind it, mounted on a wooden frame, was a suit of extremely authentic samurai armor that was unmistakably made for Satsuki. Interlocking scales lacquered navy blue, red ties and dyed leather underneath; a gracefully curved helmet complete with a crest vaguely resembling crossed scissor blades. Folded neatly beneath was a matching gi to complete the ensemble.

“Whoa.” Satsuki no longer had any doubt what was going on. Breathless, she hurried up and ran her fingers along the metal plates. “I feel... like I’m in a dream.”

“Then live that dream with me Sats,” Ryuko said, staring into her with a tremulous look in her eyes. *She’s actually worried I might not like this. As if that were possible.*

Ryuko shrunk her life-fibers around Satsuki’s body until they were just her underclothes and Satsuki wasted no time donning her period-appropriate wargear. As she did, Ryuko swiftly changed into her own naturally and historically accurate kimono and then produced some notes and began explaining, as though briefing Satsuki on a mission.

“The year is 1615. The country is united once again and you, General Matoi Satsuki, are renowned as the great strategist who brought the wars to an end and the new shogun’s right hand and closest advisor. Now, you have travelled to a newly acquired southern estate to spend the winter in comfort, and you have brought with you one Lady Ryuko, a young lady of the court who is widely considered too troublesome and rebellious for her own good. She would have been a disgrace, if not for the open secret that you have taken her as your lover,” At this point Ryuko gestured smugly towards herself and Satsuki couldn’t help but laugh. “Rumors say she is apprenticed to a wise woman who has taught her unnatural powers. And other rumors, spoken in even more hushed tones, claim that in a secret ceremony attended only by your closest confidants you have taken her as your wife. Of course, such accusations would never be spoken out loud for fear of your wrath.”

“Of course,” Satsuki chuckled, as she took a moment to figure out how to attach the chinstrap of her helmet. Latching it securely, she was at last done. Ryuko held up a mirror for her to examine herself, reborn as from the annals of history. The armor suited her, she had to say, but

looking at herself was such a fascinatingly uncanny experience. “So, you really did it then. You made my Junketsu vision, my ideal life, into a reality,” She still could hardly believe it.

Ryuko looked panicked. *Oh no, no she doesn't like it! She hates it! Why did I think I could take something so awful and make it fun?* “I-I mean if you don't like it, there's a resort on the other side of the island we could.”

“No! No no no no!” Satsuki seized Ryuko by the shoulders, urgently needing to reassure Ryuko that rather than horrified she was... well she didn't know what this feeling was, but it was good, very good. “Ryuko this is – I mean – I just want to – let's go see what you've made. Come on, please.”

Ryuko smiled, “Ohh thank god. I was so scared y'know that? But you seriously gotta see this, the castle and – okay, before I get ahead of myself, we gotta lay out the ground rules. First, everyone beyond this point who you're gonna see is an actor. You can even go into their private rooms if you want, you won't find anything that breaks the illusion. For this whole week they will act as if it really were 1615 and I won't do anything out of character either, but you can feel free to break the immersion as much or as little as you want. Oh, and there's a ring of watch towers around this peninsula It's a built on, see here,” She opened the notebook she was reading from and showed Satsuki a map. She eagerly drank it in. There was a castle in the center along a large ridge, below that a fishing village on the shore, and – wow, was that a shrine with a hot spring further up the ridgeline? “Now, those watch towers aren't the borders, not really, but they're as far as you can go without *seeing* anything from outside. You could go past that and still be in uninhabited territory, but you'd see towns and roads and stuff. So just, when we go exploring, we'll keep an eye on where those are.”

“You put so much thought into this,” Satsuki murmured, “When did you? How did you even have the time?”

Ryuko beamed and said, “Ha! Me, find the time? You remember all those times we visited different countries and I flew home on my own while you took a plane?”

“Oh! My god, but you still usually beat me home, you little devil!” Satsuki gave her a light, affectionate slap and Ryuko shoved her off with a giggle.

“Stop that! 'S not my fault I'm fast! And besides all I usually did was sign the checks for the historians who did all the actual work. Now c'mon, let's go survey your new estate, *Matoi Satsuki*.”

~~~~~

And so, mounted on horseback, they proceeded on further into the past. That surreal, dreamlike sense never left Satsuki as they rode past pods of soldiers on patrol, sweeping ocean cliffs with only a few fishing dinghies in sight, the village where crowds of peasants gathered to watch their mistress pass, and on up the winding road to the top of the ridge where a great white-walled castle oversaw it all.

Satsuki kept laughing to herself, it was hard not to. To be fair, half of that was just because Ryuko wasn't exactly good at controlling her horse and was in constant danger of falling, but the rest of the time it was because the whole situation was so bizarre. All these people, they *knew* what year it really was, they bowed down to her knowing who she actually was – because they'd been hired to do it. It was absurd on the face of it.

*I have to try and believe it, She told herself, How I could possibly hold the truth and such a contradictory fiction in my mind I have no idea, but I have to try. For Ryuko's sake, she made this all for me.* And yet, as they passed through the main gate and then the three courts of the castle, the outer holding barracks, dojos, blacksmiths and fletching workshops, the second mustering grounds for the cavalry and stables, and finally the inner court with its gardens, she really did start to believe. *She did all this... for me.*

And so as they entered into the castle tower, the place that would become general Matoi Satsuki's home, Satsuki really did feel herself slipping into this world. She was still laughing in amusement, but when Ryuko asked what she wanted to do her face fell in concern because Satsuki was tearing up.

"It's gettin' to you, huh?" Ryuko observed softly.

"Well I suppose, but mostly it's funny," Satsuki said, "I really do feel like a conquering hero who finally has her chance to rest."

~~~~~

And so they began their week in Satsuki's paradise-made-real. When people asked about it afterwards, well, they both said, "Ah, what's there to tell? We sparred all morning, we swam all afternoon, we got drunk in the evenings and then at night... well you know." But that was simply an escape route because coming up with some satisfying description, a way to make someone else understand what they'd experienced, that was impossible. Easier to say the days passed in idle tranquility – that wasn't exactly a lie – than to try and explain exactly why those memories were so captivating. Not like it was really anyone's else's business anyway.

Oh, sure it might sound simple enough to see how the memory of Ryuko standing framed by lantern light on the highest balcony of the tower, kimono half undone and with Satsuki's helmet askew on her head, would burn itself permanently in her mind. But what specific quality about it made it feel so different from all the other times they had messed around in a state of partial undress? There was no explaining it, nor was there any need to explain it.

"Hey, who am I? 'Thank you, my servant, now if you would please leave us'," Ryuko said, pulling a deep, smooth voice in mocking imitation of Satsuki.

Satsuki bit through her laughter and said, "Stop that! That isn't a toy!" And hurried to try and take the helmet back. Leaning over Ryuko, she was still powerless to stop her from holding it out over the gloom of the courtyard below. "Oh no, don't you dare."

"Hmm? Or what?" Ryuko wiggled her eyebrows. "What're you gonna – mmph!"

Satsuki cut her off by kissing her, long and hard, tilting her chin up with one hand while the other snaked up and reclaimed the helmet, placing it victoriously on her own head. "I think we can find something more fun to do than this, hmm?"

"Oh yeah?" Ryuko squirmed upright off the balcony and back into their bedroom, where she flopped languidly onto the low bed.

"What if, and I'm just throwing out ideas, we tried the life-fiber strap-on again?"



“Whoa-ho no!” Ryuko, snapping right out of any effort to stay in-period, held up her hands in protest, “Sounds like a good idea, I get it, but there’s just no fucking way to make it work. I couldn’t even stand up during that let alone-.”

“-Then what about in reverse? You wouldn’t have to stand then.”

“Well, I don’t know, I still think... you really want to try it, don’t you?” Ryuko asked, a bit surprised.

Satsuki nodded, straddling her and gently easing Ryuko’s clothes the rest of the way off her, “You said it wasn’t painful, just intense, right? What’s wrong with intense?” With Ryuko’s breasts now exposed, she took a nipple in her mouth and looked up imploringly. “I just want to make you feel good, reward you for... everything,” She said after a moment.

“Ffuck, okay, okay. Let’s try it then.”

Shedding the last vestments of her gi, Satsuki pushed Ryuko to lay flat on her back and kissed her as she traced her fingers along Satsuki’s hips, creating a thin, flexible, skintight band of shimmering white... material, of some kind. Satsuki shuddered at how the synthetic band gripped to her, and then more so as Ryuko slipped her hand between her legs and drew it forth to create the implement itself.

“Oh. Well, uh, this is a bit bigger than I remember,” Satsuki said, watching as the replica dildo draw itself into existence. Ryuko’s face when very red.

She stammered, “We-well, I have more experience with this, I’m pretty sure I can take it. I’m gonna make it two way now, okay?”

“Two-way?”

“Yeah, I want you to get off from this too, y’know?”

Satsuki half wanted to say *no, I’m ready as I am, the wait is killing me*. “But wasn’t *you* going into *me* the whole problem to begin with?”

“Yeah but like you said I don’t have to move or nothin’. Only, er, I might not be very useful after this so just assume unless I literally pass out that I’m doing alright,” Ryuko said.

“Well I’ll certainly try it, but I haven’t had anything this deep before and – eep!” Satsuki squeaked in alarm at the feeling - quite unlike the vibrators she’d tried. It flooded through her, growing in a way that convinced her it – *Ryuko* - was very much alive. She looked down at herself in wonderment, imagining that she might see the outer imprint of Ryuko’s progress.

*Hah, that was a real cute squeak ya made*, Ryuko tried to say, but making any noise but a prolonged moan was impossible. The sensation was just that overwhelming. Ryuko had fingered plenty of women in her time, but this was as if her entire hand was made from that extremely sensitive skin under the fingernails that you sometimes expose by cutting them too short. Multiplied by her hybrid supersenses, it made her shudder as her mind was filled with this feeling of clenching pressure and warmth. “Gyaaah! Hah – hah – hah – hah,” Her breath came out in ragged vocalizations as her chest heaved.

Having recovered from the initial shock, Satsuki pressed her face close to Ryuko's. "You did it," She said softly, "You're so amazing, you know that?" Ryuko was still panting, so Satsuki said, "Can you give me some sign, love? That you're ready for the next part?"

"Go," Ryuko could only get the word out as a grunt, but that was all Satsuki needed. They'd left a half drunken bottle of sake next to the bed, and Satsuki took a swig for courage before diving in.

The literal motion – hips thrusting; arms planted on either side of Ryuko – turned out to come fairly naturally. Satsuki had fantasized about something like this from time to time, and the things she'd worried about – would there be too much friction, would she get the angle right – mattered not at all in practice. And with each thrust a burst of pleasure lit her up from inside in a way she wasn't expecting.

"Ah! Oh! God, Ryuko!" She gasped, though it was plainly obvious it fell on deaf ears. Indeed, in the very moment the strap-on entered her Ryuko immediately hit her climax, washing away the very sense of her body as her limbs quaked and her back arched. But even once that receded, she could not so easily return to her senses. Indeed, she could hardly think at all.

"Ahn! Ahn! Y-y-gyahn!" Satsuki almost stopped, she couldn't tell if that noise was one of pain or some new height of pleasure. Ryuko had been trying to urge her to keep going, but it was impossible to get the words out.

All there was for her was the endless one-two burst, in and out, that washed away her very sense of her own body. Lost to it like driftwood on the waves, she wasn't aware that with every thrust the glow in her hair pulsed bright like the sun before Satsuki's enraptured eyes, and as her pleasure kept intensifying the brilliant sapphire blue of Ryuko's eyes began to glow too. Beaming fog lights, and as much as the sight shocked Satsuki she couldn't deny that she herself was close, too close to stop.

Ryuko, insensate to all this, drifted on the waves of energy that washed over her. *Definitely a circuit crossed somewhere*, she noted in a dazed half-lucidity. She could tell a second climax was coming, swelling up beneath her, and it was going to put the first to shame. She stared into the black depths of this onrushing tsunami and for just a moment it was almost like her mind was unfolding the way it did when she shrugged off her human body.

And then it hit and with a *\*POP\** Ryuko slipped into blissful unconsciousness.

When she came too, it was to Satsuki laying over her, gently playing through her hair. The look on Satsuki's face was doting and sated – she had no doubt that Ryuko would snap back any moment.

Satsuki kissed her and asked, "How was it for you?"

"... *Yeah*..."

"Yeah?"

"Thas... all I got to say," Ryuko mumbled, "You?"

"Ah, I see. It was magical for me. Thank you."

Ryuko struggled to push herself up into a sitting position, feeling the blood rush back into her head. *Oh, what happened to me?* Every part of her ached, but it was a good, comfortable kind of ache. “Guess I’m kinda sorry though.”

“Hmm?”

“Well, maybe we shoulda saved that one for later, cuz we were gonna fuck all night and now I...” She trailed off as the headrush briefly made her vision go fuzzy. “I’m gonna need a little break.”

Satsuki hum-chuckled, “I don’t find that the least bit surprising.”

“Hmmhmm. Hey, can you do me a favor though?” Ryuko motioned towards a simple wooden case by the door, “Grab that fer me.” Satsuki did so, and Ryuko carefully opened it to reveal a shimasen, a long-necked instrument resembling a lute. Ryuko tuned it as she shuffled into Satsuki’s lap.

“Oh my, I didn’t know you could play something like that,” Satsuki said.

“Of course. A lady of the court must be trained in all kinds of instruments,” Ryuko was quite suddenly back in character (not too hard considering the character was just her in another time). She began to pick out a calm, lilting tune with superhuman delicacy.

The memory of sitting there, sipping hot sake while Ryuko – still trembling slightly – played that ancient instrument, was another one Satsuki would never forget.

~~~~~

Satsuki standing in the tall grass of an open field, katana in hand, clad in her armor with her hair whipping in a ponytail behind her. That was Ryuko’s sight to remember.

“Kamijutsu!” She yelled.

“Huh?” Ryuko called across the field, competing with the dull roar of the ocean wind.

“That shall be the name of our new martial art! For years now I’ve had the chance to observe many fighters enhanced by life-fibers, and the time has come to take the next step!” Her voice was strident, “You see, I prepared a surprise for our honeymoon too, although yours has – clearly – outstripped mine in scope. Nevertheless, Tsumugu and I have been discussing for some time now how to codify the many fighting techniques used by our family into one art, a perfect blend of all human martial arts into a single school of battle in the superhuman realm. And now I want you to join us, Ryuko, as a founder of Kamijustu: The Fighting Form of Gods!”

Ryuko was speechless, a big, vicious grin across her face.

“Okay the name, to be fair, is a bit pretentious!” Satsuki called back a little sheepishly, “It’s short and to the point and I quite like the ring of it, if you’re okay with that! In other words, Ryuko, I would like to go all out with your powers, 1615 be damned.”

“Hahaha! Well, if that’s what my lady demands!” Ryuko’s hair burned bright and her kisaragi wings erupted, tearing the canvas gi she’d been wearing off of her. With a mere snap of her fingers the life-fibers in Satsuki’s underclothes sprang into action too, threading their way in

and around the armor until it glowed with pulsing blue veins, creating a life-fiber combat outfit around it. Ryuko couldn't contain herself, she'd always known the way the kamui corps dueled was something beyond ordinary martial arts, but the idea that it could be codified, passed on through history like Jiu-jitsu or Kendo or any of the myriad others? And that she would – on top of all her other accomplishments – be known as one of it's founding members? That *meant* something. "Come on then! Show me what this new Kamijutsu's gonna be all about!"

This would become their project – no, obsession. Borrowing from Ryuko's powers Satsuki couldn't quite achieve the strength a speed of a kamui, but it was more than enough. The open ridgelines, fields, and forests of the estate became their proving ground, and with Ira and Mako's wedding gifts they had just about every conceivable weapon with which to practice their techniques.

And at lunch they regrouped to discuss what they'd learned, watching the mortal "soldiers" drill in the castle dojo.

"The thing is though it'll always be faster to close in for the disarm, and once you've got to the disarm you can go for the pin," Ryuko said, making her case that unarmed combat was shaping up to be the most efficient.

"Well that might be true, but you're never going to finish them that way, and it's hard to keep a grip on someone if they really try to wrench away," Satsuki answered. "Down by the creek you had a hard time keeping a hold on me, didn't you?"

"Yeah well you kept going for the reversal before I could contain both your arms," Ryuko nodded, "Which yeah yeah, I get. But the thing is like yeah you need a life-fiber blade to go for the finishing blow it's easier to get rid of *theirs* if you go for their wrist. It's just optimal, we both know that."

"So, what do you propose?"

"Ok, not like I'm saying weapons are useless – they're fun – and besides that if you're fighting to kill they can give you mix-ups, help you stay unpredictable. In fact I'd say someone like Nonon's got a style that's *only* mix-ups. But here the thing, actual life-fiber weapons can shrink, right? So I say just keep it in reserve, have a pocket to hold it in or have your kamui add one to their form, then disarm your opponent and whip it out to go in for the kill."

"Hah! It's a fine way to develop the duel if that's what you want, but answer me this: do you really think you would have fared better against me in Osaka if you'd started out using only your fists?"

Ryuko scrunched up her face, "Well that's totally different."

"Oh, and why's that?"

"Oh geez, c'mon don't make me say it," Ryuko grumbled.

"Say what? I don't know what you mean," Satsuki replied smugly.

Slamming her hand on the table as though she were legitimately upset, Ryuko shouted, "Fine! You were better than me! You happy?"

Satsuki chuckled and held out her hands expansively, “And after all these years, the truth finally comes out!”

“Oh eat me, If I had been able to disarm you sooner you would have been all but defenseless,” Ryuko said, knowing that was the exact kind of boast Satsuki couldn’t resist.

Competitive spirit overwhelming her desire for lunch, Satsuki said, “Is that so? Well, would you care to put theory into practice then?”

“Gladly!” Ryuko sprung to her feet and tore off into the sky, descending outside the castle walls with Satsuki not far behind.

And on it went, they battled to exhaustion each day, and when they finally collapsed into sleep late at night they dreamed of raging tempests of battle, of each other’s bodies twisting through the sky in the most graceful, brutal ways.

~~~~~

On the fourth day Ryuko underwent an abrupt, involuntary transition which she probably should have seen coming. With the turnover from having the majority of the honeymoon still before them to now being more than halfway done, she was struck in a panic as time went from seemingly infinite to all-too fleeting. And so the days (after they had worn themselves out fighting) became preoccupied with completing the lengthy list of activities Ryuko had been planning to do.

Satsuki, thinking herself a bit more rational than that, had resisted that feeling of urgency only until Ryuko started listing some of the things she wanted to do. And so the order of this evening was skinny dipping.

But first, there was something else Ryuko needed to take care. She slipped into the bathroom and produced Satsuki’s phone from the secret compartment in a shelf where she’d hid it and called Ira, who’d left a missed call while they were eating dinner.

“Hey man, what’s up?” She asked.

~ “Oh, Ryuko, hello. How is everything?” ~ Ira asked.

“Good, good. Yeah, sorry about this but Satsuki’s taking a bit of a tech break for the week. Anything I can help with though?”

She could practically hear Ira shrug through the phone ~ “*Not particularly. I’m in Taiwan right now and I just wanted her to know I sent the aid fleet back to Japan full of a couple thousand starving refugees that we couldn’t feed.*” ~

“Huh?” Ryuko shook her head, “Wait wait wait, we talked about this, right? I thought Rei said we were sending enough food to feed the city for six months.”

~ “*We did, but... the logistics of distributing it, it’s never easy. I asked Rei about it and she said, ‘some things just slip through the cracks’. And that’s coming from **her** so you know if there was something else to do she would have.*” ~

“Yeah,” Ryuko sighed in agreement. “Alright, well thanks. Sounds like you did the right thing in the end.”

~ “*It’s good to hear that.*” ~ Iras said, and even though that was true the thought was worming its way into the back of Ryuko’s head.

*So what am I doing here then? Not too far away there are ships full of thousands of starving people, families... and here I am playing pretend.*

Still, she didn’t let it show, for Satsuki’s sake. And soon enough they were down on the beach, illuminated only by the reflecting moonlight and some crude torches, splashing and yelping every time a wave lurched out of the darkness.

That was another memory Satsuki would never forget. The faint red glow of Ryuko’s hair, pulsing like a jellyfish in the inky depths of the waves.

“Hey, you see that?” Satsuki said, pointing to silvery glint further along the beach. “What is that?”

Ryuko hurried over to pick it, and when she did her face fell. Plastic. A buoy from a commercial fishing net, to be precise.

Seeing it, Satsuki put a consoling hand on Ryuko’s shoulder and said, “Aww... that’s too bad.”

Ryuko obviously agreed. With her fingers and a mesh of life fibers she crushed it down until it was dense cube no wider than her fingernail, and tossed it over to the pile of her clothes.

“Hey, Ryuko,” Satsuki said plaintively, “It’s okay. That was bound to happen.”

“I know, it’s just... frustrating. I’ve got guys on boats out there, past the horizon, staying out all night to make sure no ocean trash got through. But I guess little things still just slip through the cracks, huh?”

Satsuki strolled back over to the water, “Well don’t worry too much. It’s not like I forgot what year it actually is. Now c’mon, night swimming is dangerous, I can’t go out here alone.”

Later, they retired to the castle gardens, where despite the warm climate they wrapped themselves in blankets, hair still damp and crinkly from the salt water. A servant had brought out a primitive grill and some uncooked beef, along with hot sake, so they could barbeque in the Yakiniku style.

“No no no, put that one back,” Satsuki gently urged, “It’s not done yet. Have patience.” She swatted Ryuko’s hand away from an appetizing looking strip. “Oh, but this one’s ready, take this.”

“What? But I put that one on after the other!” Ryuko, was genuinely baffled.

“Yes, but see how much thinner it is? Try it,” Satsuki grabbed the piece she meant and gingerly fed it to Ryuko. “See? On your own you would have burned one and undercooked the other.”

“I know...” Ryuko groaned, “I’m no good at cooking.”

“I wish I could disagree, but alas...” Satsuki chuckled. She placed a new strip of beef over the fire to replace the one Ryuko ate and leaned back to stare at the sky. These early hours of

the evening were the best for murmured conversations about the future, about their dreams and inner thoughts, and tonight Satsuki decided to go for the big one.

“Ryuko... do you want children?”

Ryuko was sitting right next to her on the bench, so she could feel her freeze and see the sudden panic in her eyes. “I know,” She continued quickly, “That you weren’t interested when we talked about it years ago, so I was just curious and -,”

“- Sats, it’s okay,” Ryuko felt like the ground was dropping out from under her but she looked at Satsuki with a confident smile. “You want ‘em, don’t you?”

“...Yes. I guess it’s taken me a while to wrap my own head around that. I didn’t want to scare you with the idea, but I was worried you’d notice.”

“Heh, you could say that,” Ryuko chuckled, “You one time said ‘can we keep her’ about that Miki girl. Scared the shit out of me.”

“Oh. I-I feel as though I should explain.”

“There’s nothing too explain,” Ryuko took her hand and said it earnestly, “You want kids, so I do too. Because it’s *you*.”

Satsuki felt like she could cry, and she said, “No, no but I want to explain, because I’ve thought about it a lot. It’s a lot to ask of somebody, I know, and I do wonder *why* it is that I want children. Because on it’s own it’s not a rational thing, and I can’t drag you into something so *big* just on a whim.”

*Ah, geez, how else can I explain to her it’s not that big a deal?* Ryuko wondered, but the pounding in her chest told a different story. She said, “That’s sweet, but it’s okay. I expected this would happen eventually, really I did.”

“No but it’s more than that. You know that everything I do in my work, I do for the sake of future generations, right?”

“ ‘Course. That’s what makes you... you. Well, one thing.”

“And I’ve always thought, ‘I’m still a relic of the Kiryuin days, I’m trained for war and dominion, not the sort of peaceful society we’re building’. So there’ll come a day when I don’t belong anymore and I just... vanish into retirement. What would I do then? I hope maybe my academic work will help me pass the time but... when I succeed, the world won’t need me anymore. But I don’t *want* that to mean I don’t belong, I want to have part of that future that I can call my own, just a small part. That isn’t too greedy of me, is it?”

“Aw, geez,” Ryuko mumbled, touched in a way she couldn’t put into words. “I don’t know how you can say something like that and keep it together. Of course you belong, *I* need you. But I get it too. I... yeah, I want that for you Satsuki, I want that *so much*.”

“Ohh, Ryuko!” Satsuki exclaimed, overcome with relief. She threw herself around Ryuko and said, “Ryuko, my Ryuko. I’m so happy!”

“Me too,” Ryuko found herself saying, and it was true. Seeing Satsuki so happy, she realized that even if the idea of herself as a mother was unfathomable that didn’t matter. Satsuki was going to be amazing at it, “I had thought, maybe we could adopt? Some poor orphan who never had a chance before us, how’s that sound?”

Satsuki considered it and said, “That does sound wonderful, but in truth I... I think I want to carry our children myself.”

“You do?” This was an honest surprise to Ryuko. In all her envisioning of this she always pictured adoption, pictured herself as the doting benefactor of a couple – hell, at that point why not a dozen – poor refugee children who would, she hoped, go on to do great things. It made it easier to know she would outlive all of them. But this... if Satsuki had a child herself, that would be as good as Ryuko’s own flesh and blood. Maybe this was a bit unfair to adoption but to watch her own daughter (in her head they were a daughter) – her own baby grow up, grow old, and die before her eyes? She didn’t know if she could take it.

*My life is going to be filled with hard things like that, Ryuko realized, I’ll have to find a way to go on, whether I want to or not.*

So she asked, Satsuki, “Well uh, why? Because from Ragyo’s memories I know it ain’t that - er – debilitating if you’re a hybrid, but for a regular person... seems pretty uncomfy.”

“I just want to experience it,” Satsuki shrugged, “There’s lots of things I didn’t expect I’d ever get the chance to do, and that’s one of them. I guess I don’t have much more reason than that.”

What could Ryuko say? She understood that completely. But as she stared into the fire she could see the whole chain of events played out in front of her. Satsuki pregnant, their newborn child, teaching them to walk and talk, sending them off to school. Oh god, school! What if they took after her, not Satsuki? Would she have to try to explain to teachers why they couldn’t sit still, always bothered the other kids? Or worse, what if they did take after Satsuki. How could she even pretend to help them with homework as their genius rocketed past her? And dating? Screw old age and death, there were terrors long before then.

And, worst of all, what if they had two daughters? What if the whole horrible Kiryuin cycle began all over again? Sure, Ryuko and Satsuki had managed to live together rather than kill one another, but there was something ominous about the whole thing. The memories of Ragyo, driving a broken shinai through Tora’s heart, taunting her mother as she asphyxiated. Her own memory of watching Ragyo rip her heart out and vanish. It felt like a curse that hadn’t come to pass yet.

*My daughter... if it happens again, she’ll be the one to finally kill me, Absurd though it sounded, somehow it sunk into Ryuko like a core of dread. If there was any sort of fate in the universe, then that was the certain outcome. And yet, I won’t stop it, Ryuko decided, if that is how it ends, then there’ll be a reason why. I won’t forestall Satsuki’s happiness just on a ‘what if’.*

“Ryuko?” Satsuki had been preoccupied with working the grill for a moment, and she looked over with a worried expression, “You’re crying!”

But Ryuko was able to assert control over herself, wipe away the tears and say, “I just feel as though I’m being swept into the future, whether I’m ready or not.”



“Hmmhmm,” Satsuki was sympathetic in her amusement, “I suppose we all feel that way from time to time. Did it just start feeling real to you?”

“Yeah... makes me kinda sad though.”

“Hmm?”

“When you’re pregnant you ain’t gonna have these lovely abs,” Ryuko said, bringing the mood back up with a squeeze around Satsuki’s middle that made her yelp and laugh.

“Oh, don’t be a baby, you can make it a few months,” Satsuki replied, “Here, eat. These ones came out really good.”

They ate in silence for a while, and when Ryuko was done she’d put her worries to the back of her mind. Suddenly she reached down and grabbed something off the ground.

“What have you got there?” Satsuki asked.

“Spider.”

“Ooh! Let me see?” Satsuki held out her hand, but the moment Ryuko transferred the fuzzy grey bundle of legs to her she exclaimed, “Eh!” and threw it away across the patio, where it scampered off into the gloom.

Ryuko laughed, “You said you wanted it!”

“I didn’t expect it would be so fast!” Was Satsuki response, stammered through her own hysterics. Collapsing on each other they laughed until all the tension from that serious conversation was released and felt quite silly too.

“We’re gonna have to get some pets,” Satsuki said, “I want to make sure our kids love animals.”

“Yeah. That sounds wonderful.”

~~~~~

All too soon, it was time to go. As Satsuki watched the castle recede through an airplane window, she felt oddly empty. She would never see what General Matoi Satsuki had in store for her when she returned to Japan, what intrigues and secret trysts with Lady Ryuko her imaginary alter-ego would experience. All that was left was the memories, receding just as those brilliant navy-blue flags waving over white walls vanished into the distance. The sight of those flags was the last of the unforgettable images Satsuki would be left with by their honeymoon.

“What will happen to this place now?” She asked Ryuko, “I hope there’s a plan to keep it running.”

“Oh there is,” Ryuko said proudly, “Rei and I worked it all out. We’re gonna turn it into a high-end resort, where rich people can come to get that same kinda experience. Only it’ll be League-owned so all the money will go right back to Rei to use where she needs to make people’s lives better.”

“Hmmhmm, tricking them into paying more taxes, you could say.”

“Yeah, Rei’s got a real mind for that stuff. Oh, but we’ll always get top priority for reservations, don’t worry. Maybe we could make an annual trip out of it.”

“That would be lovely. Now if only things don’t get too hectic,” Which made Ryuko laugh, because that didn’t seem too likely.

*So it’ll always be there,* the thought gave Satsuki some comfort, *Even when I’m not there, that little vision of the past will remain.* The emptiness gradually gave way to a feeling of resurgent hope as she was borne away, swept through the sky towards her future.

# Nozomi

## Chapter Summary

Ooh man this was a tough chapter to write. A lot of ground to cover and one of the most important events in the entire fic, it ends up reading like exposition and establishment of ideas for the future to me, but I also think some of the moments in here came out really great. I'm so happy to have finally gotten here, and I can't wait to see what you all think, and to keep on going with this.

Discord: EnhLut\_spare#5463

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March 2068

~~~~~

It was about a week after Ryuko and Satsuki returned from their honeymoon that Shiro called them into his office. He had no trouble finding them; Ryuko had long since made a habit of stopping by the lab whenever she had time. She worked on designing new kamui for Mataro and Yuda, passed the time while Satsuki had meetings, took in some news about what was going on in her “kingdom” that needed her opinion – which she always took in with a bemused expression that wondered “How did I end up here?”. But of course, mostly she came to fight.

At the moment she and Satsuki were in the stadium alone. Houka had been out to entertain them earlier but the quantum physics department was performing a test he wanted to observe, so now they just battled each other. Fortunately, this wasn't something they got bored doing.

He chose to enter the stadium while they were in the middle of a bout, rather than during a break, to put them at ease. Before him, two blurs clashed across their concrete stage. The swifter, glowing red, was obviously Ryuko. She sped in jagged and unpredictable motions, probing Satsuki's guard, often high in the air with a huge, wickedly curved No-Dachi poised for attack. Satsuki, a more methodical and precise blur, wore a pale blue aura and tended to keep her feet on the ground more. She defended the floor, lunging forth to challenge Ryuko wherever she landed, countering her whenever she charged.

She wielded a long halberd and twirled it in wide, brutal arcs. It looped around Ryuko when she charged, whipping her aside with such force that the ground shook. However, just the same Ryuko goaded her and when she lanced forward it was easy enough for Ryuko to sidestep, or more appropriately step *into* her, passing through her reach to land swipes with blade or hands or feet across her chest. Their exchanges were swift and furious, rarely going on for more than a couple seconds before one of them got the upper hand and set the other tumbling. But on those rare minutes where they got a real rally going, clashing uninterrupted and perfectly balanced, those

were the best. Even Shiro wasn't immune to the enchanting effects of watching such fluid grace, dancelike and furious.

One thing they had swiftly learned about kamijutsu, about the art of superhuman battle, was that there would be no optimal weapons, no one form of hand-to-hand fighting that would be universally superior. This was not a dogma that could be defined so simply as say "jiujitsu but at high speeds". In fact, the artfulness was in the personal touches. There was no one way to slip a blow in past your enemies defenses that would always work, not when your opponents had reaction times measured in milliseconds or less. Ryuko's hand-to-hand style was unrelentingly aggressive, relying mostly on punches and kicks, always going for the kill. Satsuki on the other hand focused on throws, pins, on strikes timed with surgical precision.

And this was okay, in fact it was the entire point. It would be no fun if there were only one way to do things. Kamijutsu was shaping up not to be a dogma filled with a few dozen specialized forms or techniques which masters would hone over and over again. Instead, it was a messy amalgam of diverse tactics and moves which slid freely back and forth between the unique styles of every fighter, united by common philosophy and precepts. Use that flawless coordination – every part of your body is a weapon. Redirect and exploit your enemy's momentum – they'll be coming at you with a lot of it.

When they finally finished, Shiro didn't have much to say. Just, "Hey, before you leave today could you stop by my office? I've got something I want to show you."

They agreed, obviously, but with a quiet look between them that said, "*no way this is just a social call*". Still, in the showers they returned to discussing martial arts, and before long Ryuko had mostly forgotten to be worried about what Shiro might have to say.

Sitting across the desk from him, however, she started to get some of that apprehension back. The lights were off, save for the dim orange glow from the 3D display in the center of his desk, the only adornment in an otherwise empty room. Really it was more of a meditation chamber for him, he didn't need any additional notes or computers to do work, not when he had Izanami. And she was there, too, not just via her avatar on a computer screen, but she could be felt bulging out from the wall behind Shiro. Her aura bled out from the hidden rooms full of her supercomputer components beyond. A looming presence, reminding Ryuko that the frail man before her was just a mask, an avatar for that deep, cold intellect. He lived there as much as Izanami did.

"So. It's really quite simple," He said, flush with pride, "The human hybrid project is done. It is, pending the final test of the device, now possible for human infants to be implanted and united with life-fibers, producing extradimensional entities with free will and a humanlike mind similar to yourself, Ryuko. Hybrids. I brought you here to ask about the final test phase. You see, I want you to raise the first hybrid."

*Oh no.*

He laced his fingers together, serious expression on his face, but Izanami betrayed him because Ryuko could feel that she – they – knew this was a huge gamble. It was pretty obvious what this really was. They were trying to recruit Ryuko and Satsuki as the vanguards for their vision for humanity's future. And, to make matters worse, trying to recruit their hypothetical child. Ryuko could feel how much their hopes hinged on her saying yes.

She didn't feel much like playing into Shiro's mania. The pressure of panic built behind Ryuko's ears, she felt trapped. *The future they want is one where all of humanity is like me.*

*Ascended.* It had been years since Ryuko had seriously thought about what that might mean, it seemed so far off. And now here it was.

Shiro quickly took in their shocked expressions and realized the impropriety of what he'd said, "Ahem. What I mean to say is I happen to know that you two are planning on having a child," Ryuko side-eyed Satsuki, and she nodded with a sheepish little eye roll. What was she going to do, not tell her oldest friend? "Waiting for her birth will be a *slight* delay to my schedule, but the timing of your marriage is so... convenient that I'd be a fool not to wait."

Delay to *his* schedule? Oh, that did it.

"*Yeah*, we're gonna have kids, but in like two, three years!" Ryuko exploded, "The hell's your problem, you think you can tell *us* what to do? W-when we're allowed to start our *family*? That's our decision to make, it's not on your schedule!"

"Ryuko!" Satsuki gasped, "I'm sorry, really." She put a hand over Ryuko's, a warning that, "*If you stand up now, I might be a just a tiny bit cross.*" After that she fell silent, deep in thought.

To Ryuko's surprise, Shiro chuckled and Izanami didn't feel at all put off by that rejection, "Oh, don't worry. The option will still be available then – and by then I'll be able to ensure its safety," He added quietly. "You just won't be first, is all."

"That right," Satsuki said. "Who else've you pitched this to?"

~[*Nobody at the moment, however, we are thinking of asking Tsumugu and Aoi. They're planning on having kids sometime soon as well.*]~ Izanami said through her avatar.

"They are? Huh, he never mentioned it to me," Ryuko said.

~[*Actually, they haven't mentioned it to anyone. You know how we do.*]~ Izanami said with smug satisfaction.

"It would be rather ironic, wouldn't it," Shiro said, "They used to be the worst of the Nudist Beach hardliners, I'd be entertained by that turnaround. Or, if they aren't interested, I'm sure there are millions of expecting mothers who'd kill for the chance to make their children immortal. Thought we might shop it around the research complex, see if there were any scientists interested."

"A scientist!" Ryuko again protested, "Shiro, you know if you pick the wrong one, that kid'll be treated like a science experiment! You can't do that."

Shiro sighed and spread his hands in a resigned way, "I'm aware of that possibility, but what can we do?"

"Well, you could-,"

"-Just... not make any hybrids? The only way we'd be okay with that is if it were impossible. And, obviously, we've already made several backups of the device's schematics. You'd have to raze the entire complex to the ground to get rid of the data and life-fiber supply we need," Shiro said, and Ryuko realized to her horror that even though years ago Shiro agreed to let her destroy his work if she had any objections to it, he had no intention of actually allowing that. The entire research complex was his shield, she couldn't trash the hard work of the thousands of others who worked there. Nor could she destroy Izanami and Misaki's computer components, even knowing

they'd survive as clothing. The loss of such an essential part of themselves had to be painful. Seeing that she'd arrived at the desired conclusion, Shiro said, "So, realistically, this is going to happen. Obviously, there are risks involved, I know. For instance, one question we haven't resolved is if the child should be administered the suppression serum which you were dosed with."

"No."

"Then there is an inherent threat. A hybrid child would likely have power comparable to the kamui, possibly even outstripping that. And a very limited degree of self-control."

"So that's why you chose us, then," Satsuki spoke up.

"Satsuki, *please*," Shiro said in a voice so oddly sincere that it sounded oily to Ryuko, "There's nobody who I'd rather raise the first hybrid child than you. You know that. And to be clear, Ryuko, yes were the first, technically. But neither you nor anyone else knew what you were going to become. This means you're the only one who can teach them, the only one who can show them how to use their powers safely, the only one who – when they are ready – can explain to them *what they really are*. And yes, if worse comes to worst, you're the only one who we can guarantee will be able to discipline a rampaging toddler with the capability to destroy cities."

"Fuck off," Ryuko grunted, realizing that not only was Shiro right, he'd choreographed the entire exchange from the start. He wasn't anxious, this wasn't a gamble for him, he'd played her. And worse, rather than being upset too as Ryuko might have hoped, Satsuki seemed to be more on his page than hers. In fact, what *was* she thinking?

*If she wants this, then my hands are tied, Ryuko realized, The future where there's millions of hybrids crowding around the planet, that's not something she has to deal with. And... maybe I would like to teach my kid to fly.*

Again, Shiro was unruffled. He just looked amused and said, "One way or another, you will have a relationship with this child. You'll have to teach them, nobody else can. Wouldn't you rather they be your own? Now, I certainly expected this to be shocking to you, yes, but I think this can be a good thing for you. I mean, answer me this, can you really have mortal offspring, knowing that you'll inevitably watch them die?"

Satsuki head suddenly jerked up, and she looked at Ryuko with the realization dawning on her face. She'd been so caught up in her own thoughts she only now realized how this all worked from Ryuko's side.

"Can we go talk about this?"

"Be our guests," Shiro said with a magnanimous wave.

*[Oh, but Ryuko?] Izanami said as they stood to go, [I understand, I think, why you are so hesitant. Besides the, um, request that you bear a child on our schedule which I will admit was quite rude. You've been through a lot because of what you are, and that's something you didn't have a choice in. That isn't something I think anyone would wish on their children. But... is it really so awful to be you? If it is, I'd like for you to tell me, because then the whole project is worthless after all.]*

Ryuko sighed. You could never tell with these two, if they were just acting sincere or if they really meant it, but that *sounded* like something spur of the moment and heartfelt. Ryuko said,

“No, no it ain’t all bad.”

*Wait a sec, she thought with alarm, What did she mean by **me** ‘bearing a child’?*

~~~~~

They hurried into an empty conference room across from Shiro’s office. Ryuko was still pacing around on edge, nowhere near having decided what she wanted to do. What could she do? There really was no choice, there would be more hybrids. And if that was inevitable, then she had to be the mother of the first because Shiro was right, someone had to teach them. And if that was inevitable then... what?

Somewhere in the back of her head there was this deep dread. Ragyo’s memories, from when she was pregnant with Satsuki, kept springing up. The happiest she’d ever been, certainly the only time that happiness didn’t come from dominating or tormenting someone. *Someone to spend eternity with*, that didn’t sound so bad to Ryuko. But it was the life-fibers that made her want that, was there something wrong with it Ryuko couldn’t see? And besides, she already had Senketsu to spend eternity with, and maybe the other kamui too if they survived their wearer’s deaths (Ryuko suspected they would but really it was anyone’s guess). But... that wasn’t good enough, she and Senketsu on their own weren’t strong enough to take down the life-fiber network and its master. If they were going to survive they *needed* more allies, *needed* all of humanity to be hybridized.

It was a cruel calculus, and Ryuko hated herself for even thinking it.

“Ryuko-,” Satsuki began.

“-Rrrgh, what’re we even doing here?” Ryuko cut her off, “We might as well have just stayed in there with them, you know they’re still listening!”

“Well – yes, that is probably true,” Satsuki said as a loud humming began somewhere beneath the floor. “Oh!” She exclaimed as the tiles gave way and before their eyes a black void teeming with robotic arms stretched out across the floor and swallowed the conference table, closing up into a much smaller square from which popped a dull grey metal chamber no larger than a porta-john. Its walls were thick and the door equally so, clearly totally soundproofed.

“Well that was surprisingly considerate,” Ryuko said, “Thanks guys.”

~[*Oh this isn’t a ‘guys’ kind of thing,*]~ Izanami piped in huffily from somewhere near the ceiling.  
~[*But at least **one** of us respects your privacy*]~

Ryuko carefully checked every corner and wall for hidden microphones, even peeling off the grate over the ventilation pipe and feeling around in there. Not because she really distrusted Izanami *that* much, but because neither she, nor Shiro, nor anyone else for that matter had any right inserting themselves into this. Satisfied, she and Satsuki clambered in. There wasn’t much room, but at least the bench was made out of plush soundproofing material and the ventilation kept it surprisingly cool. The lights were dim, too, and there was something comfortable and sheltered about huddling there together.

Satsuki sighed, “I wished he’d warned us.”

“I know... when the hell did they even finish?” Ryuko said softly

“From what I hear, the very day before we got married,” Satsuki hum-chuckled.

“Hahah.”

“No, that’s serious. In any case, we can take this as our warning. We don’t have to decide today, right? Why don’t we just go home and think about it a bit?”

But Ryuko shook her head, “No, no that’s just gonna make it worse. I don’t wanna just hang around knowing we have to make a call on this. It’s already hanging over my head, I don’t think that’ll go away.”

“Mhm, oh I understand that. It’s frightening, isn’t it?”

“Understatement of the millennium,” Ryuko scoffed.

“And what if it just... doesn’t work?” Satsuki asked hesitantly.

“What?” Ryuko exclaimed, “Jesus Sats, don’t talk like that! No, it’s gotta work, we can trust Shiro with that much. He’d kill himself if it didn’t work.”

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize. I’ve been very inconsiderate.” Satsuki’s voice was soft and soothing, clearly seeing that Ryuko was fraught. It only partially worked though because while her tone and presence were reassuring, it did little to stop the Ryuko wondering about just what she was thinking. “I’ve been so caught up in my own head, with why I wanted a child, I never even considered how you might feel. Knowing you would outlive them. Ohh, Ryuko,” She tenderly brushed a strand of hair from Ryuko’s check and pressed her lips to it.

“It’s more complicated than that Sats,” Ryuko said.

Satsuki nodded, “You must feel selfish. Ryuko, I know there’s things you don’t tell me. About the life-fibers. About *out there*. And now your choices are either to throw our daughter – I’m sorry, in my mind it’s a daughter – into that world. Or to bury her. Am I right?”

“Yeah that... basically sums it up,” Ryuko buried her face in her hands. “I’m just looking for a way out, a way to say no but... those maniacs have us trapped.”

“Say no? Ryuko, are you sure you want that?” Satsuki asked. “I understand, for her sake. But you can’t feel guilty about being unwilling to watch your daughter die.” Seized by a sudden thought, she lifted Ryuko’s chin and said, “Ryuko? Do you know anything about what happens to us when we die? You told Nonon and Saiban something once, didn’t you?”

Ryuko sat up, steeling herself and looking Satsuki in the eyes. She thought, *yes, it’s time. I’ve been sparing her for too long.* “Maybe I shoulda told you sooner. But I do know something. See there’s – when I go over to the other side it’s – when I go over, I can still see what we’re seeing now. Here we’ve got bodies made out of, y’know, meat and cells and stuff, and in other dimensions I’ve got a huge body made of life-fibers. You’ve seen part of it, you remember. But out there, you’re all made of something different. It’s like this web of lights, kinda like a bunch of vines or ivy, threading in and out and winding together a little point for every living thing. I don’t know what that’s made of, but I – and Senketsu too – think it’s got something to do with consciousness. Dunno for sure, but if there’s anything I’ve seen that could be a soul, that’s it.” To illustrate, Ryuko unwound some life fibers from her fingers and tried her best to create a facsimile of what she’d



seen – a hollow sphere lattice, surrounded by dancing threads that wound and unwound – all suspended above her hands.

“And they’re all connected,” Satsuki wondered at this vision projected in front of her. She was certainly used to the miraculous, but this was something else. She could understand what Ryuko was saying, use it on a logical level, but truly reckon with it? She knew that would take time, and that was acceptable.

“Yeah. So when something dies,” Ryuko illustratively unwound a little knot in her threads, “Everything that it was goes back into the rest of the web.” She retracted her life-fibers and held up her hands while saying, “Now, that doesn’t mean I know what that’s like when it happens to you or anything. All I know is when you die, both your body and everything else goes back to the Earth, unless-,” *Unless you were wearing life-fibers, in which case they take you into their network with who knows how many others and thrown into that horrible vortex to feed The Thing Behind the Veil.* The words formed in Ryuko’s mouth, but... no, she wouldn’t reveal that to Satsuki. Not yet, maybe not ever. Knowing what had really happened to their father would only hurt her. “Unless you’re like me. In which case you aren’t connected in any way I can see.”

“So we become one with the world again, body and soul. That’s... far from the worst thing imaginable,” In fact, Satsuki suspected that when she was able to really process it, that knowledge might be comforting. It meant nobody was ever really gone. *It means there’s no judgement, no punishment coming for what I’ve done.* Now *that* was a frightening thought. “It’s funny, actually. Primitive cultures around the world believed similar things. Perhaps humanity’s gut instincts about the nature of the universe were right.”

“Heh, I dunno about all of that. Don’t think they knew about life-fibers,” Ryuko chuckled. “So, um, what do you think of that?”

“What do I think? I don’t *want* to really think about it right now. No, what I was concerned with was if you thought the afterlife was something our child would be missing out on. But, if this is really the case, then it seems to me that she could go without that experience. After all, she won’t be alone forever. She’ll have you and Senketsu.”

Satsuki sounded happy with that idea. Ryuko, Senketsu, and their child, watching over the world together until the end of time. Ryuko could see the appeal. There would probably be other hybrids too, Shiro would see to that, so they would never really be alone. At once it hit Ryuko, *they’ll be a piece of Satsuki that can stay with me. Something to make sure I never forget her even when she’s long gone.* “Sats, you really want this don’t you?”

“The more I think about it, the more I do. I’m trying not to want it in the wrong way. You know, the glory of giving life to, well, what you might call the next step in human evolution. There’s a part of me that finds that very enticing,” Satsuki answered.

“Mmm, I get that, don’t worry,” Ryuko said.

“But when Shiro was talking, I just couldn’t help but picturing you and – well, a little version of you – zooming through the air above our lake together. Frivolous little thought I know, but-,”

“No, I was thinking the same thing. That maybe I’d like teaching a kid how to fly.” Satsuki hum-chuckled at their synchronicity. Ryuko went on though, “So, say the word. If you want this, I won’t stop you. But I-I dunno, if it’s up to me I’m still saying no.” In answer to Satsuki’s probing eyes she said, “I mean, immortality sounds great and all, but you know as well as I do that it means

there's a galaxy of life-fibers out there that wants you dead and... we might not beat them." Ryuko said that in a small voice. It was something she and Senketsu both knew, but this was the first time she'd admitted it out loud. "Wouldn't it be better for them to have a life, a normal human life, instead of not really getting even that? I mean you've got it all wrong, it's not about missing out on some afterlife or something. Humans *get* to die, but I..." She trailed off, holding her hands up illustratively.

"Get to die?" Satsuki's tone was as soft and thoughtful as it had been the entire conversation, but her expression went serious, "Do you really believe that, Ryuko? Because I can tell you I don't consider death a privilege."

"Well- I mean-," Ryuko stammered, "I didn't mean it like that. It's just, you can accept that, right?"

Satsuki took Ryuko's hand and squeezed it firmly as she said, "I think I'm more afraid of dying now than I ever have been in my life. Now that I have something to lose. Ryuko, I know in your mind you're picturing an innocent baby, and you want to protect her from what you've seen. But one day she will be a woman, a fully grown adult, living a life filled with its own hardships on a polluted, hungry, dying world. How could we look her in the eyes when she learns we had a chance to give her eternal youth, immortality, to never feel pain or fear, and we didn't take it? What kind of mothers would we be? How would she look at you, knowing she could never measure up or take your place, and you never expected her too? What would she be to you then, just a source of... amusement? One you know you'll outlive? How could you really see her as your daughter?" She pressed on, and Ryuko was captured by her conviction and the realization that she was right. "She might as well just be a pet to you then, I suppose that's why your first thought was of adoption."

"But... Satsuki I-," Ryuko was at a loss, "I still have to see you die. I don't get out of that either way."

"No. There's a league of difference. When this baby comes, she'll be more important to you than I ever could be. Nobody has to tell me that, it's just something that I know."

"I-I'm just not ready for that," Ryuko said, and that was maybe the most honest thing she'd said all day.

Satsuki's expression softened, "That's okay. I'm not either, to tell the truth. But we'll get to experience it together, and that's all I could ever want." She took a deep breath, cooling off from her impassioned tirade, "Phew. Okay. Sorry about that, I guess I got a bit--"

Before she could finish, Ryuko kissed her. Deep and long as though it were the only thing she'd ever want to do. Satsuki moaned in surprise as Ryuko pressed into her and folded her arms and legs around her body. When they finally parted to breathe, Satsuki asked, "Should I take that to mean you've decided?"

Ryuko just kissed her again and said, "I don't know why I even bothered worryin' about it at all."

~~~~~

Shiro was leaning with his feet up eating dinner – leftover teriyaki chicken - when Ryuko and Satsuki reentered his office. "Oh! You're still here," He said, and as he noticed the disheveled appearance of their hair, the slight smudge of Ryuko's makeup, the way Satsuki's collar seemed to

have climbed up her neck as though concealing something his face pulled a grimace. “You know I never said you had to decide *today*.”

*[What kept you?]* Izanami asked, as though it weren’t obvious.

Ryuko’s face went beet red and she blurted, “We’ll do it!” Satsuki nodded confident

Shiro sat up, beaming. His eyes looked more alive than Ryuko had ever seen them, “You will? Splendid! Thank you both, that is just *wonderful*.”

“Wait, you didn’t know that we’d agreed?” Ryuko asked.

Shiro put on a wry frown, “No Ryuko, the soundproof chamber is indeed soundproof.” He shot a look at Izanami, who giggled in response. “How did you expect us to hear you talking, if we couldn’t even hear you –,”

“Okay! Okay, point taken,” Ryuko said.

“No need to be prudish Ryuko,” Shiro sniffed, “Now, back to the matter at hand. I would tell you that you’ve made a historic decision today, one which will give the world hope when the long-term outlook for humanity is bleak, but I think you already know that.”

*Is it? I mean, I guess I knew that,* Ryuko thought, watching as Satsuki nodded and said, “Mhm,” in response. She thought about what Satsuki said, about a polluted, hungry, dying world. *But I saved the world once already. If they’re serious that we really are still doomed regardless, then what the hell have I been doing, having fun and acting like nothing’s wrong?*

Izanami continued, *~[Instead we should discuss how the hybridization process will work, I’m sure you have some questions.]~*

“Yes, please go on,” Satsuki said politely.

*~[Well, there’s both good news and bad news on that front. The good news is our device is very safe, with a number of failsafe protocols which were not included Soichiro’s original,]~* Izanami changed the 3d display in the center of the desk to show the device’s schematics. In the center there was a plinth with many mechanical limbs and parts and a small spool of life-fibers, above which rested a tiny, padded chairlike structure with a hole in the back right where an infant’s neck would go, and into which the mechanical limbs could probe. Around that, five much larger spools almost ten feet tall, stacked vertically and arranged in a pentagonal shape around the plinth, each of them with a metal beam connecting inward. And encasing this, a ring of magnetic repulsion panels.

*~[The entire surgical implantations will take no less than an hour and be conducted no later than a day after birth. First, anesthesia will be administered, then an incision to the spinal column in the neck will be opened. Implant needles will be inserted into the spinal cord between the skull and the atlas and axis vertebrae, and a small length of life-fiber will be funneled through them into the nerve. We will know within 0.0045 plus-or-minus 0.0008 seconds whether the attachment was successful. If not, the magnetic field will automatically pulse, disabling all loose life-fibers in the area, at which point you may consume them and we can either give up or reattempt, that will be up to you. However, predicted odds of success are 99.99999943 plus or minus 0.00000002 percent, and in the event of success the secondary spools will activate and begin pumping additional life-fibers into the incision until the total length within the new hybrid is roughly equal to that which we*

*kamui initially contained,]*~ Izanami explained the whole thing with appropriate scientific precision.

“In effect, we can all but guarantee success but have prepared to save your child’s life in the astronomically unlikely event of failure, which is frankly more than Soichiro ever did. Considering that your body was also filled with a powerful paralysis agent and life-fiber suppressing serum where you were hybridized, Ryuko, it’s shocking you survived at all,” Shiro summarized.

*~[However, given the time sensitivity, this does place limits on your options. Adoption is out as the child would be too old, unless you were to select a surrogate,]*~ Izanami added.

“Surrogate? Why would we even do that?” Ryuko wondered.

“Well, that doesn’t matter anyway,” Satsuki said proudly, “We’ve already discussed this and decided that I will carry the baby.”

Izanami’s face fell and she said, *~[Yes, well you see that’s where the bad news comes in. You see... I don’t know how to tell you this...]*~

“Then I will. Satsuki, you may not be able to have children.”

“...What? Why?”

“I’m afraid it’s genetics. The Kiryuin family has practiced selective breeding for higher life-fiber compatibility and ‘purity’ since at least the Meiji Restoration, and this inbreeding has resulted in a very high probability of failure to conceive and uterine wall thinning leading to, well, miscarriage. As well as numerous other health problems which you have thus far been spared such as heart murmurs, muscle spasms, early onset dementia, erectile dysfunction – though that doesn’t affect you - diabetes, I could go on. And this isn’t just from your own records, but from your surviving relatives as well. If the Kiryuin line had not fallen from power, I give it only a generation or two before they bred themselves into extinction. The only reason Ryuko is spared from all this is her hybrid body, which has ironed out such imperfections,” Satsuki listened in silent shock as Shiro somberly related all the facts.

“I don’t believe this,” She said, calm in tone but obviously upset, “This is the first I’m hearing of it.”

“Well, it is a bit of a family shame. Also, we did grow up in a rather insular bubble. I don’t suppose you would have noticed the birth rates in your relatives as unusual, but I certainly did.”

“I want a second opinion.”

“Certainly, I’m not a gynecologist, I would suggest you do that. But I suspect they would tell you the same thing I am: don’t get your hopes up.”

Satsuki sighed and said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap. It’s really not that important. This is just a surprise to me, after all Ragyo had two children which is a perfectly normal amount.”

“Only after she hybridized, though.”

“Holy shit,” Ryuko cut in, “Sats I’m sorry, I’m only just putting the pieces together on this now. But when she was teenager, see there was this girl,” No need to mention that girl was her older sister, “Who she liked, but because she was Ragyo she just had to make her jealous. Usually that was with other girls, but there were times where she’d seduce a guy too just because she could. And, um, she wasn’t very careful,” Ryuko hated to make the atmosphere even graver, but that was a natural effect of the rest of them realizing this was something she’d experienced through Ragyo’s eyes. “And there were a couple times when that caught up with her and ended up... badly.”

“I see. Thank you for telling me, Ryuko. That can’t have been easy,” Satsuki put an arm around her shoulders and kissed Ryuko on the forehead.

“No, stop that. It’s no big deal, but I’m sorry for you.”

“Why? It’s a bit of a disappointment, sure, but me carrying our child is just about the least important aspect of this,” Satsuki said, and turned to Shiro, “I’m willing to put that aside for now.”

“That’s really for the best. I’m certainly not saying you can’t try in the future, but in the interest of everything going right for your first kid it’s best that Ryuko be the one to bear them. That is, if she’s willing.”

“Yeah, I...” What was she supposed to say? There was only one thing that mattered. *Satsuki wants a baby, so I’ll give her one. Besides, I promised I would take every opportunity that came my way. This is my opportunity to experience this.* “Yeah, what the hell, I’ll do it.” She gave Satsuki’s hand a squeeze and did her best to look confident.

“You’re sure about that?” Satsuki asked, “The surrogacy option is still there.”

“Of course. I mean, I basically already have eight children. Humans, Kamui, what’s the difference? Plus I’ve got the memories of being pregnant twice. I think I can handle it.”

Satsuki looked like she could die of happiness. This was really happening! She could see the whole future spread out before her.

Ryuko could see the future before her too. But the more she thought about it, the more her gut lurched.

~[*Ryuko that’s wonderful!*]~ Izanami said, clapping her digital hands together.

Shiro, on the other hand, looked a bit surprised that she’d actually agreed. “Well, with that out of the way, you’re probably thinking this means you’ll have to choose a donor father. Now, I don’t know how you feel about that, but we can offer you an alternative. We can just clone you.”

“Clone?” Satsuki gasped, “You can do that?”

“Oh we can do lots of things, if anyone ever asked us to,” Shiro laughed. “Now, in this case I wouldn’t create an exact copy of either of you; you’re already so genetically similar that it would be easy enough for Izanami to splice in some physical traits from one to the other. This would create just about the closest thing to the biological daughter of both of you that we can comfortably create, as she would be no more inbred than either of you. Oh, and obviously it’s a bit easier to make you a daughter this way than a son, but unlike most you get to choose.”

“I’d definitely like to start with a daughter, at least,” Satsuki said.

~[So, maybe we go with a clone of Satsuki, to kind of keep up the symmetry. And maybe then you can switch for the next!]- Izanami was enthusiastic, clearly more interested in this side of it than Shiro.

But the more Ryuko thought about, the less enthusiastic she was. *The second daughter – me, Ragyo – has two of her own. The first – Satsuki, Tora – is the one to fail at overthrowing their mother, where the second succeeds. So if this one, She* shuddered, hyper-aware of her own body as though this first daughter was already growing in there, *winds up being another Satsuki, am I making it all happen again? They'd call me crazy if I said anything, but I'd have to be crazy to ignore how eerily this lines up.*

“Actually, can we do a clone of me instead?” Ryuko asked.

“Oh, sure dear.”

~[Not a problem!]-

“It’s just a feeling I have,” Ryuko explained awkwardly.

“In addition, with your consent I’d like to supplement a very tiny amount of genome – less than a hundredth of a percentage point – with someone else’s in order to correct for some of the worst Kiryuin defects which can be easily identified in the genes. I was thinking Mako might be a choice you were comfortable with, plus providing a bit of that Mankanshoku hardiness, and we already have her DNA on file as we do both of yours. And naturally none of those changes would have phenotypic effects, they would merely improve the operation of her internal organs and such.”

“Ah, I see. Phenotypic means what the person actually looks like, Ryuko,” Satsuki said helpfully, but in truth Ryuko was hardly listening. She felt sick, short of breath and nauseas, as she began to comprehend what this would mean.

*No drinking.*

*No smoking.*

***No fighting.***

*Oh god, what have I gotten myself into!*

“I need some fresh air.”

~~~~~

Ryuko didn’t make it far down the hall before a telepathic shout caught her attention.  
*[Ho! Looks like they really worked you over!]*

It was Misaki – the door to Houka’s office was open and an inviting blue-white light spilled out from a 3d projection of some kind of particle collider that he was examining. He smiled at her with his usual detached, amused expression.

“You said it,” Ryuko groaned, leaning on the door frame.

“Aren’t they magnificent?” Houka said proudly. “I’m told you’ve agreed to hybridize your kid. *And* you’ve agreed to be the one to *have* the kid. I’ve got to say, out of all of us I would

never have picked *you* as the first to get knocked up.”

[Crude! And if provided with all of the information leading to up to today, I'd say I could have predicted this outcome quite accurately.] Misaki chided him. Compared to the brooding, looming presence of Izanami, Misaki's hidden supercomputer “body” felt much less threatening. Huge, yes, but unconcerned and feeling, as many large animals do, that it can freely do whatever it wants without being bothered or bothering anyone else.

“I’m just making small talk,” Houka grumped.

Ryuko chuckled, “You know, you don’t seem too concerned about this whole thing. When’d you get off the boat on this one?”

“Oh, about when we figured out we *could* do it. It’ll be interesting to see what things are like once we’ve got several living hybrids, but right now why not let Shiro take over seeing the practical side of things through? You’re a much more cooperative test subject than a screaming toddler would be, I can tell you that much.”

“High praise coming from you.”

[You’d better believe it.]

“No, see this is the deal we’ve come up with. Shiro loves to apologize to me and say, ‘it’ll just be a bit longer,’ but the truth is we still work together every day, not like I could miss him or anything. It’s just this way I get to focus on projects I’m interested in. Win-win. Er, don’t tell him I said that though.”

“I won’t.”

Houka sighed, “I do miss our date nights though, glad those’ll be coming back.”

“Date nights?”

“Oh yeah, every Friday when we’re not too busy he’ll cook up a doria or some brownies - I can’t cook to save my life, can you?”

“God no, if someone put a gun to my head and told me to make somethin’ more complex than a burger I’d tell ‘em to just get it over with, not like it’d hurt me anyway,” Ryuko answered, feeling much better to be having a normal, sane conversation with someone.

“Haha! Well, we eat that and then we playtest the balance updates for a multiplayer mod we’re making for *Solar Flare 2* on a private server. It’s a VR game, you know it? The one where you play different classes which are different species of alien?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the trailers and I played the first one with Mataro a couple times. I mostly just play *Misty Islands* on my laptop though, never really got into VR games.”

Houka scrunched up his nose, “That isn’t a gacha-game, is it?”

“No! It’s good, you like go around and explore these randomized islands and fight monsters and find people who you bring back to your little village,” Ryuko said. “It’s fun, it’s nice and relaxing. It is, really!” She insisted when Houka looked skeptical. “Anyway, isn’t it kinda like cheating to play a video game with a supercomputer kamui?”

“That’s why we go on the private server.”

Ryuko shrugged and changed subjects, “Oh, so who would you have picked? For the first to have a kid, I mean.”

“Oh, Aoi, obviously. They’ve been talking about having one lately.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“If not her, then probably Mako. Or hell, maybe even Nonon, if Uzu got careless one night.”

Ryuko laughed, “Oh god! I hope not, for his sake. She’d kill him. And even if she didn’t, then he’d have to deal with a mini-Nonon. She’s already mini enough.”

“I bear no responsibility for what I speak into reality. Prophets cannot be sued,” Houka quipped, holding his hands up defensively.

Ryuko laughed and then said, “Ahh, but seriously, I know why you wouldn’t have picked me first. I am *not* ready for this shit. How the hell could anyone be?”

“It was brave of you to do this for Satsuki. No, seriously, I mean it. How’d she take it, by the way?”

“She... welllll?” Ryuko said hesitantly.

*[So not that good.]* Misaki concluded.

“It kinda sucked. Kinda really sucked, actually. But she’ll see after this one it’s more trouble than it’s worth and let me do the rest too if we decide to have more kids,” Ryuko said before really realizing what was coming out of her mouth. It seemed easier to decide something like that in a casual conversation, without so much monumental weight in every choice.

*[You’d do that? I thought you were saying you didn’t want to be pregnant even the once.]*

“Well, I don’t, but it’s not so bad for us hybrids. Less of a toll on the body, y’know?”

Houka nodded, “Yes, I suppose that does make sense. And you’ve decided to have a daughter first, yes?”

“Oh yeah, Satsuki was pretty sure of that. As for me, eh, I dunno. Maybe if we think she needs a sibling we could mix it up next time, who can say? Try a son, see what’s that’s like. No, but you wanna know the worst part? *No fighting*. For nine. Whole. Months.” Houka shook his head in commiseration, “Yeah, see? And we just started working on Kamijutsu!”

“You can watch recordings of our fights, you know. It’s obviously not the same but it’s *something*.”

“Well sure it’s *something*. I mean, I can still project a defense field using my clothes so it’s not like I’m totally in danger, but there’s *no fucking way* I’d ever trust that against a serious gut punch. And that just means if you guys really need me...”



*[Then we'll have to just not need you.]* Misaki said confidently, and Ryuko felt an upwelling of gratitude.

"And I guess I could do some light sparring at human speeds against Satsuki or someone else who'd be careful, but even then I'd have to do with a big fuckin' bump sticking out of me and," Reminding herself of that, of how *that's gonna happen to me*, made her feel sick all over again. "Oh *my god...*"

"Hey, come on, sit down," Houka said, and she hurriedly did so, controlling her breathing until she felt normal again. "You still have time, you know."

"Huh?"

"What, did you think they were gonna have the clone embryo ready right away? No, that takes a couple days. And besides that, the procedure has to be done at a *pretty* specific timing in your cycle in order to guarantee it'll take. So it's not like you're leaving here pregnant today or anything. You've got a little while to get your kicks in."

"Really? Oh." Well, that was reassuring. "How long do you think I have?"

*[We don't have enough information to tell.]*

"And I'm not your doctor. I don't need any details. But one thing I can tell you is that nobody's using the arena right now. So don't tell me you aren't up for a little kamijutsu research right now."

~~~~~

And so began a roughly two week stretch in Ryuko's life of effectively uninterrupted hedonism. Trying to cram nine months' worth of alcohol and weed and cracking her friends heads into as little time as possible. The daily routine was simple – wake up, hair-of-the-dog, hurry over to the research complex, pretend to listen to people asking for her royal input on something or other and then immediately refer them to someone else, pick whoever was standing around and duel until they got bored or had to go at which point she and Satsuki fought until dinner time. At which point it was time to really begin the day, raiding the manor's well provisioned cellar and drinking and smoking to exhaustion, or maybe going over to Mataro's penthouse as a guest of honor. She even managed to rope Satsuki into it by the end, albeit on a fairly limited level (just a sip here or there, a couple experimental and largely unsuccessful hits from Ryuko's makeshift bong).

It quickly became a joke in Ryuko's small circle of friends that she had decided she was still on honeymoon, which did indeed make it all easier to get away with. By the end though she was starting to feel a little worried that nobody else really noticed that much was different.

There were joys in it, certainly. Ryuko had never realized how much fun it was to fly drunk, zooming erratically through the swirling sky, watching the world below her grow ever vaster the higher she climbed. Sensing that the party was still ongoing, Mataro and Aikuro and some of her more bacchanalian acquaintances made themselves frequent guests, so she was never short a full table for a late-night game of cards. And, of course, there was little better than curling up with Satsuki for a movie, inevitably followed by sex and – when she could handle it – the triumphant return of the life-fiber strap-on.

It wasn't possible for a hybrid to suffer memory loss from overindulging in drink or smoke, but the days blurred together all the same.

Which was probably why she felt quite calm and not especially hesitant when she arrived on the scheduled day. She'd had her fill, at least for now. Satsuki, on the other hand, looked worse for the wear. Pale with dark circles under her eyes and an uncharacteristic lethargy.

"My goodness, Satsuki are you alright?" Shiro exclaimed. "I can get you some cold medicine if you'd like."

"Nah, she's alright," Ryuko said, and Satsuki nodded, "She just drank a forty and had the leftovers from my hit – what, twice last night?"

"just twice," Satsuki said.

"Yeah! Rock on!"

"woo," Satsuki replied unenthusiastically, but she still bumped Ryuko's fist with a smile all the same. It had been a good, if exhausting, week for her too. A last send-off to their time as young people not bound down by a greater responsibility. And she felt like both she and Ryuko had gotten more comfortable with that idea.

Satsuki squeezed Ryuko's hand tight as she lay on the padded lab table, waiting while the final setup happened. "Hey, it's alright," Ryuko murmured, "You don't have ta squeeze, I've got this."

"I know. I just want to, I guess."

The procedure itself, however, turned out to be totally unceremonious. Only one robot arm was involved (almost a disappointment for Ryuko) and Izanami played the role of encouraging nurse while Shiro made himself scarce. Ryuko barely had the time to ask, "Are we starting?" before Izanami suddenly chirped [*Congratulations! The zygote has been accepted!*]

And that was it.

Ryuko left the research complex feeling a peculiar feeling of lightness. All the tension she'd felt two weeks ago had been gradually lifting, and now she realized there was nothing left to be afraid of. Nestled up next to Satsuki in the back of a chauffeured security car she felt an odd fuzziness in her abdomen. How much of that was just in her head, and how much of that was something only her supersenses could reveal? There was no way to tell, but she found herself relishing that feeling almost as much as the soft, firm press of Satsuki's body. Hell, it was all worth it just to preserve that perfectly toned figure she so adored.

Was she fulfilling some kind of Kiryuin curse? Was she dooming her daughter to fight alongside her against the life-fibers for all eternity? It didn't matter at that moment. No other choice now, even if she had wanted one.

*Well, buckle up and enjoy the ride, Ryuko.*

"Hey," Ryuko said, "I thought of what I want to name her."

"Hmm?"

“Nozomi.”

Satsuki’s voice was no longer quaking from the hangover but instead filled with a peaceful, tender warmth. “That’s the name that father was going to give Senketsu, isn’t it? Hope.”

“Yeah. Isn’t that perfect?”

“I was just going to say. That is perfect.”

The next morning, Ryuko awoke feeling hungry – truly hungry – for the first time in years.

## Chapter End Notes

Yes, I have been planning that Nozomi name reveal THE ENTIRE GODDAMN TIME.

Also one scene I wound up having to cut for length was Senketsu's reaction to all this. We'll get to that, don't worry.

And lastly, in case you were trying to guess how I plan the rest of the story to pan out, you should know that between this part and each of the next two parts there will be a roughly ten year time skip. I don't think that spoils anything but should get imaginations going.

# The Weight of Decision

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March 2068

~~~~~

“Hey Mom.”

~ “Hi Ryuko! Your father and I went into town today to get some new film for his camera and some lunch, we’ll be home for dinner. We’re bringing Mako back a fro-yo, you want anything?” ~ Sukuyo said pleasantly.

“Nah, nah I’m good. Listen though, I’ve got something important to tell you.” Ryuko took a deep breath and a swig of water to steel herself. The water really helped – feeling truly hungry was a bit terrifying even if breakfast did taste better than usual today, but to actually feel thirsty and be able to quench it? It was *heavenly*. She finally said, “You’re gonna be a grandma.”

~ “Oh no, did Mako- “~

“What? N-no! It’s me. I’m pregnant.”

It took Sukuyo a moment to fully comprehend that, but when she did Ryuko could all but hear her smile, ~ “Huh? Oh! Oh my god Ryuko! You – I mean – wow!” ~

“Yeah, I know. Just did the procedure yesterday. It’s crazy, isn’t it?”

~ “Crazy! It’s wonderful, it’s - Oh, I’m so happy! So when did you – and how did you?” ~ She was so excited that she felt no need to complete a sentence.

“Ah, well we just talked to some of our scientist friends, y’know? Turns out they can do a lot with genetics these days,” Ryuko said awkwardly.

~ “Wait, does that mean the baby is really both of yours?” ~

“Well, uh, yeah, basically. It’s kinda complicated actually, but I guess that’s the idea.”

Sukuyo blurted, “That’s *amazing*! Is Satsuki there too? How is she?”

“Yeah, she is,” Ryuko looked up and motioned to Satsuki, who was in the bathroom doing her hair with the door open. “We’re both very happy.” Satsuki came over to where Ryuko was sitting and pressed a kiss on the back of Ryuko’s head.

~ “I’m sure you are, I can hear that much. Oh! Put me on speaker phone!” ~ When Ryuko did, Sukuyo loudly said, ~ “Congratulations, both of you! You’re going to be wonderful parents! Here, hold on, let me get Dad and – oh, where did he get off to – hun?” ~ She could probably hear that Satsuki hum-chuckled at that because she said, ~ “I’m sorry, looks like I have to go find him. Don’t go anywhere, though, okay? We’ll head right back home!” ~

“What?” *Why’s it gotta be such a big deal?* “No, don’t be crazy, we still have work and meetings and stuff. But we’ll see you later, alright.”

~ “*Okay! I’ll stop by the store and get you some stuff you’re gonna want. Byebye now! Congratulations! I love you sweetie!*”~

“By Mom. Oh, and if you could please, try not to tell anyone just yet. I don’t want like everyone on Earth to know before I can’t hide it anymore.”

~ “*But I have to tell Mako and Mataro,*” ~ Sukuyo protested.

“Yeah, well. Okay, you can tell them. But nobody else, got it?”

~ “*Mhm! My lips are sealed!*” ~ Sukuyo said and after some last goodbyes she hung up. Ryuko got up to help Satsuki finish getting ready, removing the towel she had wrapped around her body and drawing her outfit onto her.

“That was sweet,” Satsuki said.

“Yeah,” Ryuko smiled softly. As she worked, Satsuki held her by the hips and ran her thumbs in circles over Ryuko’s abdomen. *We’re in this together now*, Ryuko thought, which was about the more reassuring thing in the world.

“Only, do you really expect it not to get out immediately? I mean, once Mako knows…”

Ryuko shrugged, “Yeah, but what was I supposed to do? I wouldn’t feel right not telling her, you gotta tell your mom!”

“Oh, I agree,” Satsuki nodded. Ryuko materialized two navy-blue sashes for the waist of Satsuki’s dress, one with embroidery in two shades of blue, the other in gold, and Satsuki motioned towards the blue one. “It will be nice to be able to rely on her experience, won’t it. Oh, which shoes do you like with this?”

“Were you gonna wear tights? It’s a little nippy, so I’d go with the blue-grey tights with your white heels,” Ryuko answered.

“Really? Well, you’re the expert.”

“Yeah, kinda creates a nice gradient. Here I can make the tights,” Ryuko said, and with just a touch to Satsuki’s thigh spun the fabric from herself. “Who’re we meeting with today, by the way?”

“War council first, same as ever. Nonon’s back today, she just repelled a counter-attack at Shanghai on her own and Rei and Uzu had a run-in with Ranketsu but chased it off, so congratulate her on that. Then it’s the ministry of education.”

“Oh god, education.”

“Mhm, and did that make you think – should we send Nozomi to public school or not?” Satsuki asked.

Ryuko’s response was immediate, “What? No way, I mean – ah I dunno, it’s so far away.”

“No, tell me.”

“We can’t send her to a public school, she’s *gotta* be tutored,” Ryuko said plaintively. “Sats you didn’t go to ‘em, you don’t know what it’s like.”

Satsuki frowned, “It’s a whole different system now. No more teachers beating kids with rulers, upperclassmen enforcers, all day solitary time-out, no more marching with guns every morning,” Ryuko raised her eyebrow and she said, “Okay, well they still do that, but the guns are fake now. But more to the point, what we – you – do is very important. Sending Nozomi to a public school, even just the little suburban one in town, would be a sign that you support the school system. Plus, it would help her socialize.”

“Socialize?” Ryuko scoffed, “Yeah fucking right.”

“Hey,” Satsuki said sympathetically, coming over to kiss Ryuko, “I know, you aren’t just thinking of your own childhood, but of how different Nozomi will be from her classmates. A super-powered princess. That’s definitely a problem.”

“But yet she’ll have to learn how to deal with normal people somehow, huh?”

“Indeed. Is it... frightening to talk about this?”

Ryuko thought for a second and said, “I mean, I guess, but it’s so far away now. I’m much more worried about the next nine months.”

“Hmm, I see. To tell the truth it is a little worrying to me. We have to make all the right choices and right now there aren’t enough facts to plan everything out,” Satsuki said. “I think to myself ‘maybe private tutoring would be better in the long run, she could learn the way I did’ but then ‘if she’s like you, she won’t respond to that well’ and we won’t know until probably it’s too late and you can’t just go changing everything on a kid because *you* made a mistake, they need consistency. So yes I guess I am a bit frightened.”

“Nah, you’re excited, you liar,” Ryuko saw right through that. Something that got Satsuki’s brain working like that, even if it was an intimidating prospect, was exciting to her.

Satsuki grinned, “I am also excited.” Ryuko’s phone began ringing, and the contact photo showed Mako’s big doe eyes. “Ah, and speaking of excitement.”

“Oh boy,” Ryuko chuckled, “Prepare yourself.” She answered the phone, put it to speaker mode, held it at arm’s length and said, “Hello!”

~ “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”~

Mako must've heard Ryuko and Satsuki burst out laughing because as she ran out of breath she started laughing in a giddy wheeze, ~ "AAAAHAHAHA...Ha...Haaaa," ~ Before taking a deep breath and staring right back up again, ~ "HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-RYUKOOO! *Holycrap holycrap holycrap you're HAVING A BABY?*"~

“Mako calm down!” Ryuko had to shout to get it through.

~ “Can’t!” ~

“Okay, well just –,” Ryuko was drown out by another round of “Holy craps”, “Just come down to the lab today and I’ll tell you all about it, alright?”

~~~~~

Nonon got to the Research Complex early. There wasn’t really anything better to do, and it meant she got to have breakfast and work out with Houka before the meetings she was needed at. So she was sitting in the meeting room along with a couple other early arrivals when Satsuki and Ryuko walked in.

Saiban immediately sensed that something was up with Ryuko. There was something different in her aura, something ever so slightly different and faint, not life-fiber but biological. *[What’s different here?]* He softly asked Nonon. She figured it out almost immediately, they’d sensed this before from time to time in other women.

“She’s *pregnant!*” Nonon hissed, shocked but soft enough that nobody except Saiban could hear it. Well, Saiban and Ryuko. Ryuko’s head immediately whipped around, eyes wide and horrified, and Nonon met them only briefly before turning away in embarrassment. Well, that was dumb, obviously Ryuko would hear her. But she was right, wasn’t she? There wasn’t anything else it could be.

Nonon’s mind was occupied for the entire rest of the meeting. *Does she know? No, of course she does, lesbians do not accidentally get pregnant. So what, she got some man to be her donor? No way, Ryuko would never do that. They must have gone to one of the scientists. Which one? Shit, did Houka know about this? Why didn’t he tell me? I have a right to know, now Ryuko’s not gonna be there as our last resort weapon!* Baffled though she was, Nonon immediately knew that sending Ryuko into a battle and endangering the baby was simply unacceptable. *Didn’t she know that? Didn’t Satsuki? Does Satsuki even know this happened? What the hell was she thinking?*

That burning question just had to be answered, so she ambushed Ryuko in the hall the moment the meeting broke and Satsuki wandered off to talk to some minister or other.

“Who else knows?” She demanded.

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, who else know’s you’re-,” Before Nonon could finish, Ryuko slammed a hand over her mouth and quickly shoved her into the nearest unoccupied room, some lab or another. The lights flicked on automatically. As soon as Ryuko removed her hand Nonon yelled, “The hell’s your problem? What the fuck? Why?”

“Shh! Shut up! Don’t just shout shit like that in the hallways,” Ryuko was clearly agitated, she hadn’t expected she have to face backlash until she’d gotten used to it herself. She knew exactly what Nonon was going to say, and she didn’t have anything to come back with. But, on the other hand, this was Nonon she was talking to and an upset, exasperated Nonon wasn’t exactly a bad thing. “Yeah, yes, I’m pregnant, okay? Are you happy? How did you even know?”

“Saiban sniffed it out from your aura,” Nonon answered simply.

*[Sorry.]*

“Okay, first off, don’t go poking around in other people’s auras. Rude.”

“Ryuko your presence is like the goddamn sun to him, how was he not supposed to notice?” Nonon said. “I just... I really can’t believe this. I mean *you*. You’re having a baby. This is just... if it were Mako I wouldn’t bat an eye but *you*?”

“Her name’s gonna be Nozomi,” Ryuko said as sweetly as she could.

Nonon rubbed a hand over her face, “Ugh, of course you already picked out a name. And a lame one too.”

“Wha – excuse me! That’s the name my dad was gonna give Senketsu!” That one was a bit too far, and Ryuko got up in Nonon’s face and shouted. “What’s your fucking problem, I get this’s a surprise but who the hell told you it was your business!”

“A joke! Geez, Sor-ry!” Nonon responded, holding her hands up in surrender. Ryuko backed off, both of them embarrassed, and after a moment Nonon said, “But it is kind of my business. It’s kind of all of our business. You realize this means you can’t fight, right? You did think about that, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. It’s risky, but seems like you’ve got REVOCS on the ropes without me. I thought you’d be happy to prove you didn’t need me.”

“And I thought you wouldn’t give up sparring with us for anything, but here we are. It’s not about me, you’re putting everything at risk,” Nonon said in a cooler voice, “The war isn’t over yet, we can’t let our guard down, not for a minute. I thought Satsuki would have made that clear to you, no, you of all people should know that.”

*[But then, you were the one who told Satsuki that you wanted to see how she’d live now that she’s got something to live for. You have to wonder, where does she play into this?] Saiban pointed out to Nonon, though he could feel from her that she was skeptical. The chances Satsuki knew about this were pretty high, but Nonon thought it more likely that the idea began with Ryuko. After all, if it were Satsuki who wanted a baby, she’d be the one to carry it. [Still, this is clearly more important to Ryuko than you or I could guess. You have to think it must be important to Satsuki too.]*

“I know a hell of a lot more than you. We’ll all be glad when there’s more than one hybrid who can fight. Still gonna be a while, sure, but that’s why it’s good I’m getting started on that now.”

That changed things, Nonon realized. “Wait, hold on. You’re saying that your baby’s gonna be... like you? Holy...”

“Yup. Changes things, don’t it?” Ryuko said smugly, and for the first time felt not scared but just a little proud of what Nozomi would become. It was so self-evident to Nonon that her girl would grow up to be fighter just like her, maybe even stronger.

*[This isn’t too different from what Rosuketsu said,] Saiban realized with a chill, [She really does have the urge to self-propagate. Even if she doesn’t realize it herself.]*

Nonon had a slightly different, less panicked take though. “Oh, I see, this is starting to make sense now. So Shiro calls you in to say he’s figured out how to hybridize your kid and you



say, 'I'm in, let's go' without giving it a second thought."

"No, not at all. I mean, yeah, I guess we decided kinda fast, but we gave it plenty of thought. What else were we supposed to do?" *You don't know the situation I'm in here. Shiro strongarmed me into it, but he's right. The first hybrid will need me to guide them, and my daughter needs to be like me, or she won't really be mine.* "Legitimately, what other choice did I have?"

"I should've known you'd see it that way," Nonon sighed, "You really have no control over your own life, do you?"

"Is that so?"

"I mean you never think about what you're doing, do you? You just go off gut instinct, so even though you're the literal *queen* of a fifth of Earth's population and richer than sin you can't take yourself out of the 'hood', can you?" Nonon smirked; she was exaggerating and poking fun but there was a core of truth in it to her. "I mean, being real, if you'd never come to Honnouji you'd probably have ended up a young mom in over her head, I bet. At least this way you're not single, even if that means dragging Satsuki in too."

Ryuko had to laugh at that. "Phahaha man, I don't think I ever know what's going on in your head. Look I'm sorry, I get it. No, seriously, do you really think *I'm* thrilled about this? Me? I-I mean the arenas like a five-minute walk that way and I'm sitting here thinking about how badly I just want to get in there. I mean, she's literally a coupla' cells now, if you used a practice sword instead of *Kiba* nothing bad would happen. But no, I have to be smart because if I do that then in a month or whenever when it – it starts to show it'll be harder cuz I'll go 'nah, I can make it one more day' over and over again and then one of you morons would punch me in the belly and then where would I be! Does that sound like *fun* to you?"

Nonon paused because she really hadn't seen it from Ryuko's perspective. *Then if she didn't want this, then it's on Satsuki.* Her mood softened, but only a little. It still made no goddamn sense. "Then why?"

"It's just something I had to do," It didn't feel right to tell Nonon it was because Satsuki was infertile. Let her decide who should know that. "But is having a kid really that awful to you? I mean, everyone else I've told so far has been congratulating me and all excited – more than I am. So what's your problem?"

"Kids are like a participation trophy for life," Nonon scoffed. "People with boring lives have them so they can feel like they accomplished something."

"That's really what you think?" Ryuko shook her head. "No way, there's no way that you believe that you're just tryna piss me off. But fine, I guess, whatever. You should see what Satsuki has to say about it though."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that I don't think she'd agree," Ryuko's phone vibrated and she turned to go – Mako was up in the lobby and had just heard that the meeting was over. "Actually, I *know* she won't. I'm gonna go now, talk to someone who's actually *nice* and *supportive*. But first..."

"What?"

“You have to say congratulations,” Ryuko said smugly, leaning in the doorway.

“Oh please,” Nonon rolled her eyes.

“C’mon, pretty please?”

“No.”

“You’ve got to though. It’s the rules.”

“I’ve never heard of any such law.”

“Then I’ll make it a law. Would you do it then?”

“Ugh, fine,” Nonon groaned, “Congratulations on your stupid super-baby you’re totally not ready for.”

“Thanks,” Ryuko grinned. As much as it hurt having Nonon – rightly – point out that disabling herself as a fighter put them all at risk, it was funny to squeeze that out of her.

“Wait, hold on a sec, how’d you already know you’re having a girl?” Nonon tried to ask, but Ryuko had already left.

~~~~~

Satsuki was in her office, getting ready for the ministry of education meeting when Nonon found her.

“Ah, hello Nonon. I presume you’ve heard,” Satsuki greeted her in a punctilious but sweet tone. “Well? How does this sit with you?”

Nonon sighed, *yeah, okay, this was definitely Satsuki’s idea as much Ryuko’s, maybe more*. She said, “You know, when I told you I wanted to see what you’d do if you took a break and lived your life, I didn’t think that meant you’d get our *last resort weapon* pregnant! I mean, how even?”

Satsuki blinked, “Nonon, you know there are machines that-,”

“Oh-my-fuckin’-, no not that! How the hell did you talk her into it!”

“She agreed right away, actually. I mean, after we found out that I... might not be able to have children.”

That changed things. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” Nonon gasped. She immediately went from just baffled at this sudden turn to wanting to give Satsuki a hug. The way she’d said that was just... it meant more to her than Nonon had realized.

“They don’t know for sure,” Satsuki said resolutely.

“Well sure, but...” Nonon trailed off with a shrug. “So, is this something you would have wanted? You know, if you had been able to live your life the way you wanted from the start, would you have wanted a family?”

“Hmm... I suppose I would have,” Satsuki answered thoughtfully. “Perhaps it would not have been so high on my priorities, or so young but, I think I would have liked to have children. Why?”

“I dunno?” Nonon said as she sat down, “I guess I’m just kind of surprised. I didn’t expect you’d see it as such a big deal.”

“No, in the grand scheme of things it’s not. But I suppose the question is if in this alternate, simpler life I have Ryuko or not, because say if we did grow up together in a regular household that would have made... everything else impossible, surely. And that matters, I don’t think I’d do it if I couldn’t do it with her. I want everyone to see that loving side of her, I think we could enjoy being mothers together. And... I’d say I’m also curious how I’d do at it. That’s the sort of reason where I don’t think it matters what hypothetical scenario you throw at me, so long as I’m still me I’d still want to have children,” Satsuki concluded.

“I mean sure. To get that experience, there’s really only one way to do it.”

“Right. But there’s more than that, too. I mean, I *have* led an unusual life so far. I think it’s fair to say I’m well educated, and maybe that would help me bring my daughter up right. But then, I’m also a trained killer. No no, let’s be reasonable here,” She cut Nonon off before she had a chance to protest. “Even though I love martial arts, and even though I’m proud of my mind, I only have these things because I had to. I want to pass on these things to Nozomi, and I want to see if I *can*. Does that make sense?”

It was an interesting thought. Nonon had never really doubted that Satsuki’s daughter would take after her, but it wasn’t something she’d ever really thought of. In fact, this all hadn’t really sunken in yet, the farthest into the future she could picture was Ryuko visibly pregnant (visual nonsense though the image was). What would Satsuki’s daughter be like? The one unquestionable thing – she would be a hybrid – didn’t address what her personality might be like. With Satsuki’s influence, she could become a girl maybe quite a lot like the one Nonon had grown up alongside. Or, with Ryuko’s influence, maybe the worst brat the world had ever seen. Nonon couldn’t help it, she was curious how that would play out too. “Yeah, it does. It’d be a shame if you didn’t though, since she’s gonna be a hybrid too. Which speaking of, how did that happen?”

“Oh, Ryuko mentioned that? Well as much as she didn’t like the idea at first, it is necessary. If Ryuko couldn’t see her daughter as an equal, then what would be the point?”

Nonon felt like pointing out, *well maybe it’s her problem if she considers power the only measure of who’s her equal*, but her heart wasn’t in it. “She could’ve just said that to me,” Nonon grumbled, “Instead of just being like ‘*oh, we had no choice*’.”

“Well, you should not have dissed our choice of name,” Satsuki said.

“What! How did – she texted you, didn’t she?”

Satsuki giggled and showed Nonon her phone. The message was confounding *\*se dont like nizi!!!!\** “Wha?”

“She does this sometimes,” Satsuki giggled – this was obviously very endearing to her, “She types so fast that she outruns the autocorrect. She probably did it when she looked like she was just putting her hand in her pocket, she’s very sneaky about that.”

“That idiot. Yeah, I know exactly when she sent that,” Nonon laughed too at the realization that in the same moment that Ryuko was yelling at her she was typing out that oddly adorable message. “Okay, well this is starting to make some more sense now, I guess. You know, she didn’t tell me about your condition – er, your potential condition. So like, yeah I told her that was irresponsible” – this, Satsuki understood, was code for ‘got a little mad’. “- which I guess maybe if she’d told me more wouldn’t have been my reaction.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Satsuki said, “There’s nothing to apologize for. We knew we could get any kind of reaction, and honestly, your response has been milder than I was expecting.”

“Huh? No...” Nonon stood up and gave Satsuki a hug. “It’s your life. And I think this will be good in the long run – provided we don’t end up needing Ryuko when she can’t fight and all die horribly, but y’know. I think I’ve always kind of hoped I’d know your daughter one day.”

“She’ll be Ryuko’s daughter too.”

“... Don’t remind me...” Nonon managed to grumble through it, but when Satsuki chuckled, she laughed too. After a moment, not really wanting to say it but eventually willing herself too, “But seriously, with Ryuko off the board, I hope you’re ready to pull your weight. Wasn’t like she was doing much, but without an instant-win option we need to beat REVOCS even faster.”

Satsuki didn’t need to be told what Nonon meant. She nodded seriously. *I suppose more blood on my hands at this stage is something I’ll just have to live with. For my daughter’s sake, it will be worth it.*

“How much of Ryuko’s power can you draw out with that thing, anyway?”

Satsuki shrugged and said, “I can comfortably handle about what the final phase of Goku Uniforms could. Any more than that and it gets a bit stiff.”

“That’s more than enough for you though.”

“I’m glad you think so. I suppose I am interested in seeing how it fares in a field test,” She smoothed a hand over her dress. *A few more souls returned to the planet, what’s the harm in that?*

But Nonon’s guilt got the better of her and she said, “I mean, you don’t have to. I’m not ordering you to or anything, obviously.”

“No, but it’s alright. I don’t want Nozomi to grow up in a world at war. I’ll see you on the mainland.”

~~~~~

“I can’t believe you’re having a baby! Lemme feel!” Mako shouted instead of a normal greeting the moment she and Ryuko were alone in the lobby.

“Um, sure, I guess,” Ryuko said, “There isn’t really anything different to feel yet though.” Mako barely let Ryuko sit down before hiking up her blouse and laying a hand on Ryuko’s belly. Considering how handsy Mako normally was, this felt totally normal, but Ryuko was still disconcerted by the thought that, *there will be though. And there’s nothing I can do about it.*

Mako still seemed impressed somehow. "...Whoa," She said, and then suddenly gasped and opened her mouth really wide, about to burst into something.

"Oho no!" Ryuko said, "I know what you're thinkin', and no way in hell."

"Whaaat?" Mako whined.

"You're thinking that now you have to get pregnant too so that we can have our kids at the same time, and they can be best friends. You are, aren't you? I know how you think, don't deny it! Well knock it off, right now! That's ridiculous," Ryuko's efforts were frantic, she didn't have a good track record talking Mako out of things and she had to admit the idea was appealing.

"Oh come on why not! Little Mankanshokus and Matois *have* to be besties, you know that! You shouldn'ta done this without tellin' me if you're gonna tell me I can't have kids too!" Mako pouted.

"Well, you aren't married for one! What do you think Ira would say?"

"Ahh, he doesn't care! We're gonna have kids one day probably anyway," Mako said.

*I shouldn't even bother explaining how that doesn't work. She already knows, and doesn't care,* Ryuko thought, but she did it anyway. "No, Mako, I mean, just because of that doesn't mean he'll be okay with it *now*, before you're married!"

"Well he's not the one who'd have the baby anyway. I mean I could just go off the birth control for a bit and -,"

"-Like hell you will!" Ryuko shouted, genuinely alarmed. *That's one family tradition I won't let her carry on, even if I have to tell her the truth, that she was a wedlock baby too.* "What would people say, huh?"

The side wing of the lobby they were in was totally empty and noise was drowned out by a large fountain, but even so a secretary heard Ryuko yell and came out of a side office to see what the fuss was about. However, the moment she saw it was the queen she turned around and hurried back inside.

"I didn't say I was gonna!" Mako whined, "I'm sorry! I'm just sayin' though. Don't you want our kids to be besties?"

"Well sure, I mean of course, but," *But I didn't really think about that before, I just looked at it from how it would affect me and Satsuki.* "And I mean I'm not saying you shouldn't get married and have kids soon either, just," *Have I just kicked something off, and soon enough everyone else is gonna be married with kids too? I'm sure Mako and Ira will as soon as the war is over, and apparently Aoi and Tsumugu, maybe even Nonon and Uzu will once they see how things are going. And, y'know, Houka and Shiro will probably just keep doing their thing, same with Aikuro. But are the rest of us gonna be "settled down" soon? It's too early for that!* "I dunno. I wish I could've told you, but there wasn't really a chance. I mean, it's not the end of the world if Nozomi's a few months older than your baby, is it?"

*Actually, it would be quite something if she had a boy and Nozomi and him fell in love.* In Ryuko's mind the thought that Nozomi might end up sharing her sexuality was both statistically

unlikely and unthinkable. That would mean the cycle really was repeating. *Jesus, listen to me. I already sound like a housewife.*

Mako gasped, “OH! Nozomi! That’s the name you picked! Ohhh that’s so cute!”

“I know,” Ryuko smiled, happier to indulge herself by talking about something simpler. “It’s what my dad was going to name Senketsu.”

“Ohmygod,” Mako’s breath was taken away by how beautiful that was, “So you can name her after him, even though she’s gonna be a girl.”

“Yeah. Oh! Reminds me by the way. The reason why I know she’s – I’m having a girl,” saying that out loud still felt so weird, “Is that, um, and I know this sounds crazy but-,”

“You had her, like DNA and stuff done in the lab? Because she’s already gonna be turned into a part-human-part-life-fiber supergirl like you?” Mako finished the sentence.

“Uh, actually yeah. Damn, you know you’re the first one I’ve told who like, figured that out right away.”

“Well duh!” Mako exclaimed. “That’s because I know if she’s your daughter she’s gonna be awesome like you!”

“Yeah, that is one way to look at it,” Ryuko said, then added affectionately, “That’s the Mako way to look at it. But not just that, there’s something else. Shiro told me it didn’t matter, but I think you should know they actually used a teeny-tiny bit of your DNA. Like, to patch up all the inbreeding in my family. Won’t change the way she looks or anything, but.”

“No. Way.”

“It’s not supposed to be a big deal. They told me that Ghengis Khan will probably be closer related to her than you but you’ll still actually be related.”

Mako gasped, “So I’m like really gonna be her aunt? Ohhh! EEEEE!” Her excitement bubbled over into a squeal. “And my kids – one day – they’ll really be her cousins! Oh! Do you think they could be hybrid too? C’mon, they have to be!”

*Well, if someone’s gotta be the next after Nozomi, they might as well,* Ryuko thought. But it was still so far off. She couldn’t commit to anything without worrying she might say something she’d later regret. “I mean maybe. That ain’t all up to me. But you’re supposed to be like, genetically more compatible with life-fibers so your kids might be *crazy* as hybrids. Who knows?”

“I sure hope they let me hybridize them too,” Mako said, plopping her chin on her hands. Ryuko put an arm around her and gave her an affectionate shake.

“Really? Why?”

“Well, then they’ll live forever. Who wouldn’t want that?”

“I love how simple you make everything,” Ryuko said. When you put it like that, it was just like what Satsuki said. Of course she wanted her daughter to live forever, who wouldn’t? “But that’s still a long way out. It’s crazy enough to think that I’m – literally right now – growing a whole person, right there,” She pointed to her abdomen. “It hasn’t even really sunk in yet.”

“Mmm. You wanna do something?” Mako, pitch perfect, detected that the topic was making Ryuko uncomfortable and it was time for a change, “Maybe record a vlog?”

“I dunno if I trust you not to shout it out, live on the internet that I’m pregnant,” Ryuko chuckled.

“I would never!”

“Not on purpose you wouldn’t!” Ryuko shot back.

The ended up taking a stroll around the research complex, eventually ending up in the biology department’s conservation wing. They watched some kind of rare rainforest frog housed in glass terrariums, vigilantly guarding writhing masses of tiny grey tadpoles.

“Well, if they can manage it, how bad could I do?” Ryuko observed to herself.

~~~~~

When Ryuko and Satsuki returned home, Satsuki still had a little work to do. Ryuko left her to her own devices and could feel her floors above – sense the motions of her arms as she typed, the steady breathing and flick of her head as she read. And meanwhile, Ryuko sat in her favorite lounge and wished for her to wrap things up soon.

Across from her was the polished mahogany of the bar, pristine taps and multitude of bottles and glasses glinting beautifully.

“Don’t fucking mock me,” Ryuko said to it, laughing at her own joke.

She heard from a long way away someone approaching with the huge, rustling bustle of a bunch of shopping bags in their hands. Ryuko got up to help them with the door and was greeted by Sukuyo, beaming and full of energy.

“Found you!” She exclaimed merrily, hurrying in and gently scattering her bags around on various couches and chairs. “Oh, here, here. Lemon Sorbet, extra-large, your favorite!” She produced a huge ice-cream cup from one of the smaller bags and thrust it at Ryuko.

“Gee, you didn’t have to,” Ryuko said sweetly. But she *was* hungry, and it *was* her favorite. She couldn’t help herself but dig in even as she thought, *I’m gonna be so full I burst later*. “I mean, Satsuki will be upset with me if I don’t eat a healthy dinner,” She said, which wasn’t exactly true – Satsuki would understand.

“Oh please, that’s barely the half of it,” Sukuyo kept digging around. “Here, this is for your back,” She produced a cylindrical memory foam pillow and shoved it behind Ryuko’s lumbar vertebrae despite a yelp of protest. Next was a little plastic tub with a water vibrator, “And for your feet. Oh, and this is great,” Sukuyo brought out a long, rectangular object similar to a plushie, “You put this in the microwave, and it stays hot for *hours*. Put it under your shirt or nightgown when you sleep, right on your back, it’ll do *wonders*.” She finally looked up at Ryuko and spotted the troubled look on her face then. “Oh, sweetie, what’s the matter?”

Sukuyo got up immediately and hurried over to hug Ryuko. “I just...” Ryuko held up a hand illustratively.

“Aw, I get it. It’s a lot, isn’t it? I’m sorry for getting all worked up.”

“No, it’s okay. Really, I just feel a little overwhelmed, is all,” Ryuko murmured, taking refuge in her sorbet. “Y’know. Not ready.”

“I know, I do. I was right where you are, I know exactly what it’s like,” Sukuyo said, “There’s still so much you wanted to do before this, isn’t there? Well, don’t worry, you’re rich. You’ll be fine.”

“Haha!” Ryuko barked in a surprised laugh. “Ohh man, was that meant as a joke?”

“But it’s true!”

Between eating, Ryuko said, “This morning, when I called you, I was feeling pretty okay with it. But when I went out into the real world and it wasn’t just me and Satsuki anymore, I started feeling like ‘I’m gonna have to live with this’. I don’t know if I can do it, and it hasn’t even really started yet.”

Sukuyo thought for a while, still sitting next to Ryuko, “It feels like everything’s going to be different now, right? Like, you won’t be able to really go to parties or practice martial arts with your friends for a little while, sure. But you know those are hardly the biggest changes you’ll – well, you’ll see.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“No, no I know. But... oh dear let’s see... I can’t tell you it’s not going to be a big change, because it will. But that’s not going to happen all at once, so maybe it’s best if you focus on all the things that *aren’t* going to change.”

“You think?”

“Oh, sure! That’s what I did, basically. When I found out, I just went right back into work the next day – I was waitressing at the time. And I kept doing that and trying not to let it get me down! Although... eventually one of the older waitresses told me that if I didn’t quit before I got any bigger, she’d shove me out the door the next time she saw me,” Sukuyo laughed fondly, as if that resembled a good memory.

“Jesus,” Ryuko said, “That sounds kinda rough.”

“Well, we needed the money! And it was fine, because by then I was ready. Or close enough, anyway. But if you spend the whole time worrying if you’re ready to be a mom it’ll just make it that much more stressful. And that’s not good for you or the baby. So maybe you can’t drink or fight, but what else is there you can still do?”

As she thought about, Ryuko had to agree Sukuyo had a point. “Well, I still have kamui to make, for one. And I can spend more time working on regular fashion design too,” Ryuko offered. Sukuyo nodded encouragingly and she went on, “And I can get back on my little plan to kinda self-educate-myself. Which, uh, I kinda got a lil lazy on and just started watching documentaries and saying I was learning. But whether it’s like ancient history or dinosaurs or planets or whatever Satsuki keeps saying they’re inaccurate, I dunno.”



“Damn her! She’s too smart for her own good!” Sukuyo joked, and they both had a good laugh at that.

“Ahh, you know maybe it won’t be so bad,” Ryuko said. “I mean, you did it twice and it wasn’t so bad, right?”

“Nope!” Sukuyo responded brightly, “It is an experience, but don’t worry. I’ll be here to help – I wish I had someone who could’ve when I was your age. You’re going to get through this, and you’re going to be an amazing mom. No come on, eat. You need your strength!”

They stayed and chatted for a while, and Ryuko forgot for a little while why she was even nervous and overwhelmed in the first place. She was far from the first to be young, about to become a parent, and feeling totally out of her depth. Mako didn’t understand the weight of it, Satsuki was only learning along with her, but Sukuyo knew. Hell, she’d had it far worse, and here she was. *She’s so nice and sweet*, Ryuko thought, *I wonder if she was always like that, or if raising two kids made her that way. Maybe one day I’ll find a way to be like that.* Ryuko chuckled to herself, *Not fuckin’ likely.*

Eventually, they wound back around to talking about Ryuko’s life, what would change at what wouldn’t. She said, “There is one thing which is gonna be a problem, which I don’t think even Satsuki really gets yet. I’ve gotta find a new way to talk to Senketsu.”

“Huh? Oh, Mataro mentioned that to me. Senketsu is still out there somehow, in space, is that right?”

“Well, uh, kinda,” Ryuko tried her best to explain, “See, life-fibers can go into this – well, let’s call it another dimension, and that’s where he is. And part of me is here, and part of me is on that other side, which is why I can’t die and all that. But to jump over I have to cut the connection between the two sides of me, which I usually – um, well, I usually do it by shooting myself with a special gun. And then when I’m done there I can reconnect and it’s like nothing happened, I can do it super-fast too. But I don’t what my body would do, like, to her if it thought I was dead, even for a split second. I don’t want to risk it. So I have to find a new way. Shit, that sounded super crazy, didn’t it?” Ryuko said, worried because Sukuyo’s mouth was hanging open a little in bemusement.

“No, it’s about the usual level of crazy,” She shook it off and beamed. “I’m sure you’ll find a way to get back to him, I wouldn’t worry.”

“I do already have an idea of what to start with,” Ryuko said.

“He must be so happy for you.”

“Oh man, you have no idea.”

~~~~~

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

Ryuko had hopped out of her human body mere moments before she and Satsuki left for the research complex the day before. This would be the last time for a while unless she found a way to desync without blowing her brains out, so they made it count.

Their shared imagining had stretched out beyond that pristine lake, though it remained the center of this tiny universe. Mountains and deep forests stretched out around them, and even surveyed from the great height of the tallest peak the edges faded out into mist before the luminescent shapes of their true forms reared from the distant sky. This world was their place of peace, and some of the other places they'd imagined – the dingy back alley where Ragyo's brass orb still hung in perpetual torment, for example – existed elsewhere, on other three-dimensional "levels" within Ryuko's vastness. Here there was only the wind blowing wave-like through the pines, the cool perfection of the mountains and skies, and the faint ringing of windchimes that hung on the wooden gables of this little shrine Senketsu had built on that tallest peak.

It had been a long time – days, years, who knew – since they'd talked about what was about to happen to Ryuko's human body. They found ways to pass the time. Creating all this, dueling each other (a bit of a fool's errand, since they were both able to predict the other's moves), but really even that wasn't necessary. They could spend forever just existing together. But once it felt like they had, Ryuko's mind turned back to Earth, where Satsuki was waiting for her.

"Well, this is it, a least for a while," Ryuko said, leaning on the shrine's balcony rail.

Immediately Senketsu was tearing up again, as he always did when reminded that Ryuko would soon have a daughter. "I'm so proud of you," He blubbered, "Don't worry about me, I'll still be here. You take all the time you need to enjoy your new family."

"Dude, chill," She laughed, "I'll be back before you know it. And she'll be up here with us before you know it too."

Where Ryuko's mind still rebelled against the idea, to Senketsu it was nothing short of inspiring. When his body was destroyed, he spent so many dark and distant epochs drifting, utterly alone in an alien universe. It would start with Nozomi, but it wouldn't end there. This boreal dream valley would be the birthplace of a new civilization, and he would never be alone again. Ryuko knew all this, and they didn't need to bother arguing over whether it was a good thing or not. They skipped right over that, to Senketsu calming himself and saying, "For you, life is split between this world and yours. You're trapped, one foot in each. It won't be the same for her. She will move between the two a naturally as she breathes. My little namesake..." He couldn't contain himself anymore and with a choked noise he cut off.

Ryuko rubbed his back and said, "I can't wait for you to meet her. I keep tryna think of how it'll go." To demonstrate, she shifted herself over to the doorway across the main hall, entering as though she'd climbed the mountain, and Senketsu's polished stone back faced her as he played his part, cool and august, overseeing his domain.

And then suddenly there was a warm touch on Ryuko's hand. Tiny fingers holding it. She looked down with a gasp and there was a little girl standing there, big blue eyes wide in wonder. She had Satsuki's long straight hair and Ryuko's fiery eyes, Satsuki's perfectly proportioned face and Ryuko's off-kilter, too-big canine teeth. She looked up at Ryuko and smiled and just at the end her eyes went a little crosseyed and Ryuko couldn't help it. Her heart felt like it was going to burst. There was nothing, *nothing* else like this.

She dropped to her knee, put her hands on the little girls cheeks. It felt so real, so *alive*, that Ryuko was suddenly moved to despair realizing that Senketsu had imagined her just moments before. She looked up at him, and the inscrutable, heavy look on his face said more than words ever could.

She could barely stop herself from crying, “Don’t – don’t toy with me like this, man!”

“You imagined this just as much as I,” he said sagely, and in the moment that she realized he was right the girl was gone, vanished as though she never existed.

And Ryuko felt the briefest whisper of the horrible, all consuming loss that she’d felt watching Ragyo’s love for Satsuki die.

She looked back to Senketsu, at a loss yet unwilling to return the figment to life, “I-I don’t get it, why?”

Senketsu smiled tenderly, “You’re going to love her. That’s all I needed to see to know for sure.” He came over and picked her up, wrapping her in a hug that was far softer and warmer than an animated statue had any right to be. “I’m serious. Don’t come back too soon on my account. What you’re going to experience, bringing her up, it’s a very human thing – I don’t know a damn thing about it,” He chuckled, “But if you don’t experience it fully, you’ll regret it forever. So try not to be frightened, okay?”

Of course, she was frightened the moment she got back to Earth. But then, was that part of the experience too? She wanted to go back and see what he thought of that, but by that point it was too late.

~~~~~

“Whatcha readin’?” Ryuko asked, snuggling herself in close and plopping her head on Satsuki’s chest. She couldn’t really see the pages from this angle, but she could look up at the sweet look on Satsuki’s face.

“Some European history, just some ‘easy reading’,” She made the quotes using her free hand, before snaking it down Ryuko’s nightgown to caress her, “Oh! That’s hot!”

“Ehehe, sorry, I wound up using the heated plushie Mom got me after all,” Ryuko shifted so it slid further down her belly, away from Satsuki’s gently probing fingers. “Feels pretty good, actually. You wanna read to me?”

Satsuki hum-chuckled at the idea, “I’m sure it will be an easy way to lull us both to sleep.”

“Nah, you look so smart I’d stay up all night watchin’. Just start wherever, I’ll figure it out.”

“I don’t see how you could, but okay,” Satsuki relented, “Ahem. ‘Chapter three: Sovereignty. For three miserable months in the autumn of 1552, Charles the fifth besieged Metz with the largest army he ever commanded. The French had taken the city five months earlier in agreement with Protestant princes...”

*\*hey about today\** Ryuko’s phone buzzed. A text from Nonon.

*\*I’m sorry I snapped\*\*If I had known you were doing it for Satsuki I wouldn’t have\**

“...The princes had already forced his younger brother Ferdinand to agree to the Peace of – hey, you aren’t listening!” Satsuki exclaimed, gently bopping Ryuko on the nose with the book in

chastisement.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Nonon just sent me a text though... apologizing, which is – did you tell her to do this?”

“No, not at all. But her attitude did change swiftly once I explained the situation,” Satsuki explained.

“Geez, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I did. What are you going to say?” Satsuki asked, but instead of a response she just watched Ryuko type it out herself.

*\*It’s okay. It was her call to tell you or not. Nothing to apologize. \** An actually serious response, since it was rare enough for Nonon to be so contrite.

*\*makes the whole thing make more sense\*\*still feel kinda bad though\**

*\*Hey that works for me\**

*\*stfu im trying to be serious\**

*\*Ok fine. Thanks for apologizing\**

Nonon didn’t respond immediately, so Satsuki prepared to resume reading when *\*still can’t believe you’re gonna be fat for nine months\**

“Oho!” Ryuko laughed, “That’s more like it!”

*\*Not all nine months! Just the last few!\**

*\*whats the difference if you cant fight?\*\*you know i use you as my yardstick to see how much saiban and me have grown\*\*what are we gonna do now\**

*\*Doesn’t seem like much of a problem to me\*\*not like you grow much anyway\**

*\*omg\*\*cute\*\*but I swear if when this is over you got soft and we’ve surpassed you I will kill you for real\*\*and then again when you come back a couple times\** Nonon responded in a flurry. *\*you’d better get down to the lab, crack open those life fiber vats, and drink up bitch\**

“You know, that’s not a bad idea,” Ryuko murmured to herself. *How much stronger could I get from absorbing life-fibers every single day? Definitely strong enough to beat REVOCS all on my own.*

She typed out *\*Maybe I will\* \*but how about this, if in nine months this war isn’t over I’m coming in and ending it all on my own\*\* One day, two fists\*\*Maybe a sword if I’m feeling fancy\*\*So hurry it up, I ain’t gonna let Satsuki be off at war when I’m trying to take care of a real alive baby\**

*\*Oh is that so\*\*It’s on then\**

Ryuko put her phone down with a chuckle, and Satsuki asked, “Were you serious about that?”

“Well sure,” Ryuko shrugged, “I overheard you guys before, and I’m okay with you pitching in with fighting, if that what you want to do – I’m coming along though, just to watch and make sure nothing goes wrong – but the moment I get the chance I’m putting a stop to that. ‘Sides, if the war is still on by then, it’ll be about damn time ‘The Queen’ gets off her ass and does something.”

“Hmmhmm, that is certainly true. I hope it won’t come to that, though. Now, do you have anyone else you’d like to text, or can we rejoin our friend Charles the fifth and see how things are going for him at Metz?”

“Now that you mention it, I probably should text Ira and tell him to put a ring on that shit before Mako takes matters into her own hands.”

“Oh dear. Yes, I think that would be prudent.”

## Chapter End Notes

If you were curious, the lines from a history book Satsuki reads are literally from the book, "The Heart of Europe" by Peter H. Wilson. A great read if you like really in-depth history content.

# The Punished

## Chapter Summary

Revisiting our villains. And villain-adjacent characters.

Warning that this is a fairly dark chapter. I wasn't sure how I was going to handle it for quite a while, and I tried not to go too grisly or drag it out.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2068

~~~~~

Minazuki's whole world was pain. It was everywhere, all the time. At first, the immediate causes were overwhelming and obvious. Her right arm was gone, there was a hole in her belly where a kidney had been stabbed out, and she was completely deaf in both ears from the noise of Krakatoa's eruption. Those four points of agony were all she knew for the first – well, who knew how long – but over time they faded, blended, became one endless cloud over every moment.

Her sleep was fitful, riven with endless nightmares. She relived that moment, laying with searing lungs and wild eyes staring in uncomprehending terror at the shape of the monster, a tiny woman with pink hair and burning eyes. Her, stalking forward ever so slowly across the searing, blackened stone, surrounded by leaching fumes and trails of molten rock, drenched in blood. Her face was fixed in a snarling, triumphant grin that turned its cute features savage, and she regarded Minazuki's broken body seeming at any moment ready to finish the job.

### *Jakuzure*

She would wake up, shaking and drenched in cold sweat, with that name running through her mind. “*Traitor! Monster! Hate you!*” She howled those words at Nonon and her kamui every night. She didn't know where it came from, it was like someone else was speaking through her sleep. It felt like something she should remember. But there was a lot she didn't remember.

She didn't remember how she got off Krakatoa, for one thing. She'd gone into shock almost instantly, coming too in a horrible, bleary haze in the back of a helicopter. It was just momentary though, and a burst of powerful painkillers sent her under again and she awoke in a hospital bed in the cool, vaulted halls of the REVOCS HQ. The pain shocked her to awareness and at first, she just laid there with the panic rising in her head as she realized just how broken her body waws. And then she thrashed and screamed and sobbed in terror until a swarm of nurses surrounded her and resumed her morphine drip and she faded again.

The next time she awoke, she was in her own quarters. The lavishly decorated VIP room looked exactly how she'd remembered it with its plush rug, canopied bed, and mahogany furniture. For

the briefest moment she hoped against hope that it had all been a horrible dream, that everything since the ceremony where she put on Rosuketsu was just a figment of her imagination. But the pain could not be denied.

But all of that was things she would have wanted to forget anyway. No need to see the doctors scrambling to save her life, to know what it felt like to linger comatose on death's door for unknown weeks, maybe months. It was what came before that was really matter. There was much more broken about Minazuki than just the physical.

There was a void, a gap in her memory huge and dark and terrible. It wasn't like she simply dribbled some blood on Rosuketsu and the next thing she knew she was awoken on Krakatoa. She knew, she *knew* those moments were ages apart, but between them... nothing.

Whatever had been there had been ripped from her. All she knew was that whatever it was meant more than anything else. And without it, there was no joy left. Nothing at all worth living for.

All she could do was lay in the dark and hurt.

~~~~~

Her body betrayed her when the nurses brought food. She couldn't think much, couldn't fight through the bleak delirium of what had been taken from her for long, but when she did she resolved to simply lay there until it was all over. She resisted several lavish dinners, despite their alluring smells, but finally caved to omurice. The simple comfort of it and the gnawing in her stomach were too much. She sat up, joints creaking from convalescence, and ate with dry, cracked lips and a dull, ravenous expression in thoughtless eyes.

There were physical therapists, a team of nurses who tried to coax her into reviving the use of what was left of her body. They roused her cyclically, maybe once a day or maybe more. With no windows in her room the passage of time was marked not in hours or days but in meals and the nurse's interruptions.

They were ever so gentle, coaxing her to sit and stand slowly. With the waving of their hands and text on screens they tried, day by day, to get her to do something. Anything. But the will just wasn't there. Doctors would come in and performed a number of increasingly intrusive tests on her and came away baffled. Minazuki just stared through all of them.

*They're lying to me. Acting like if I just believe in myself, smile a little, then everything can be how it was. How it was supposed to be. But we all know that when Rosuketsu died, so did I.*

She asked to see Takamori, or Kuroido, or her sponsor. Then she begged, voice hoarse and croaking. They told her to focus on feeling better. Every time it was the same, and every time Minazuki sank further and futher.

*This is a prison, Minazuki finally realized. They aren't coming to see me because they don't care what happens to me. They never cared about me, they only brought me here because they needed me to wear Rosuketsu. And now they don't need be but can't discard me either. So I've just been stowed away, forgotten. Everything I was told about them is true. They're just crazy cultists who worship monsters that only exist to use and destroy people.*

And she did kind of get the sense that she was an afterthought, after a while. Everyone had a preoccupied feeling to them all the time. Things seemed frantic, frightened. She began to

piece it together. Rosuketsu had been lost, the war was all but lost, and there were much bigger problems than her recovery. She might have been happy, could she feel that emotion any longer. It might have been some small degree of revenge if only she weren't stuck right there in the base with them as it all came crashing down.

Or if it weren't that monster Jakuzure who would surely be storming in here any day now to finish them off.

She resolved that she had to escape. Right or wrong, good or evil, REVOCS was a lost cause. She would never return to Japan, Satsuki and the rest would never forgive her. But surely somewhere out there someone was kind, stupidly kind, and would protect her. Let her fade away someplace other than this prison. Over time it became a dream, a vision of herself stumbling into some remote village near the HQ's secret entrance and being taken in. Decent, ordinary people – she'd never believed in them before but now yearned for them to save her – they would take her in, nurse her back to health, teach her to be of use in some simple way. There was a comfort in thinking about how soon she would throw herself upon their mercy and escape from the cogs of this vast machine, this meatgrinder that Satsuki's regime and REVOCS together created.

Exactly how long it took for her to work up the courage she didn't know, but it was a while. In spite of everything her bed was comfy and changed daily, her room was warm, and the omurice was good. So, it was with a bit of apprehension that she took to obvious first step of trying the door.

To her surprise, it was unlocked.

Stumbling through the base in the haze of deafness was hard. The vaulted, sterile chambers were cold under her simple nightgown and her legs trembled with weakness. It felt less busy than she remembered. When she'd first arrived, it was a place buzzing with activity. Teeming with cultists driven on by fervent belief in a just cause. Now the very air was permeated with a sense of panic. There was no question, they were losing.

It was on that long walk that she finally glimpsed her own reflection in a polished marble wall. She almost couldn't believe it was her. Face grey and sunken, limbs thin and wasted, belly soft and paunchy from too much omurice and no exercise, hair a tangled mess. *No big loss if she doesn't survive the journey* she thought dimly, but trembles of fear raced through her all the same. She barely had any idea where the secret base was, was there anywhere to go? Any chance that someone would save her? If there wasn't, she was as good as dead anyway.

The cultists she passed mostly ignored her. She was an honored guest, a Kiryuin even after everything, and if she was out and moving after so many months of convalescence that was a good sign. A few even had their spirits lifted, seeing how the once exalted hostess of Rosuketsu soldiered on.

She found her way to an exit she remembered, a small airlock at surface level without a direct guard. By the time someone in the hall behind her realized what she was doing and turned, shouting "Hey! Stop that!" Minazuki had already input the code and the door was slowly rumbling open. *No, not now!* She spotted them out of the corner of her eye and whipped her head around in panic. "Stay back!" she screeched, and the woman who'd spotted her was stricken with a look of revulsion. Moving as fast as her emaciated legs could carry her, Minazuki scrambled through the airlock.

~~~~~



The cold wind blasted Minazuki in the face. Struggling to see in the night's darkness outside, she stumbled and slid on rocks, sharp and slick and coated in snow and ice.

A rocky beach, desolate and utterly devoid of life. Minazuki's mouth hung open as she slowly turned, taking it all in. Behind her was a cliff, sheer stone into which the base was dug. On top the pitch-black shadows of pines loomed and offered no promise of protection. She stumbled further, desperate to get away. But as her eyes became adjusted, she realized it was pointless.

Before her there was nothing but the endless inky darkness of a raging polar sea.

The subzero temperature swiftly robbed Minazuki of what little feeling she had left. She collapsed to her knees. That was it, there was no chance she would be able to swim to freedom. The twenty-foot sprays of salt and foam that crashed continuously on the rocks would dash her to pieces before she even tried.

Minazuki did not resist as the thick hands of a pair of guards wrapped around her shoulders (well, one shoulder and one stump) and hauled her inside. There was no point. No escape, no redemption, nobody coming to save her. She was as good as dead already.

As her head rolled back, limply accepting her fate, she found herself staring up at the auroras. They'd been there the whole time, green and purple and deep blue flicking as though alive. So distant, empty beauty far beyond her reach. She wanted to ask the guards to just let her lay there, watching them, until the cold froze her solid. Instead, she broke down sobbing again.

When they brought her back to her room, finally, Takamori came to see her.

~~~~~

Well, the first thing that happened was she collapsed from sheer exhaustion, buoyed by the overpowering warmth as her body re-adjusted to the indoors. But when she woke up, it was to the vague feeling that someone was in the room with her.

She sat bolt upright, gasping in shock when she saw him. He'd pulled up her desk chair and was sitting at the foot of her bed, patient and nonchalant. He spoke, and the tablet computer he was holding formed the words *\*Hello. I'm sorry I didn't come sooner.\**

"You... *fuck!*" Faster than she still knew she could, Minazuki was up and lunging at him. One feeble hand around his neck didn't do much. She couldn't even tip him out of his chair, her strength had atrophied so. "Where were you!" She shouted, loud and hoarse, nearly inhuman. She couldn't hear herself, the only feedback she had was how raw her throat felt, "You-you-left me! Left! GO AWAY! GO AWAY! Go! away!" But even that little outburst was nearly too much for her, and before she knew it only Takamori's arms were keeping her upright, pounding uselessly on his chest with a trembling fist.

He patted her on the back somberly, and at last she comprehended the ruin that had become of his face.

"No..." She murmured weakly as she traced along where smooth metal met blistered skin. Of all the Kiryuin men of their generation – all selectively bred to be lookers – he had been the most handsome. Perfectly smooth face, sharp features, commanding and sophisticated. The last time she'd seen him imprisonment had already begun to make those features sag. Now there was little left that was recognizable.

His entire jaw had been torn off by the force of Itsuki's point blank shot, replaced by a skeletal metal replacement with a grim simulation of teeth, and tiny gyros around the hinge that allowed for a crude kind of movement. The skin joined to it along his cheeks and jowls was lumpy and grey, and a huge scar from a piece of shrapnel ran down from brow to lip. But more recently, when he'd barely survived his encounter with Uzu, the explosion of his mech had scalded the left side of his face horribly. Mottled pink and grey, twisted and runny, the burnt flesh was just as permanently ruined as his jaw. The only thing that had been allowed to survive was his hair, which had returned to his preferred puffy coif. It only served to remind Minazuki of what he'd once been.

"Not you too..." She wept. There was nothing else to do. The fury that had been stewing in her, the realization that he really was just as evil as everyone said and only ever used her, it blended together with the sight of him like this. She hated him so, so much, but yet she loved him even more. And now he was broken too. *He will never smile again, just like me.*

He pulled her onto his lap and held her until the shaking stopped. The momentary rage and grief quickly gave way to the same utter deadness she was well familiar with.

*\*I'm sorry.\** The speech-to-text read *\*I should have been here. \*\*I had my own injuries to recover from. \*\*And then I was sent to fight again. \*\*They didn't tell me how bad you were until you tried to escape.\**

Minazuki just looked at Takamori sullenly. He sighed (or at least his metal jaw moved in pantomime) and he said, *\*Okay. I was also scared. \*\*I didn't want to see how hurt you were. \*\*You know, I was there when it happened. \*\*I tried to save you.\**

*Liar, heartless fucking rat,* She thought, knowing that all of that was just more deception. After so long, she knew he'd forgotten about her. But the harrowed look in his eyes said that even if nothing he'd said was true, the feeling behind it was. The image of her worn-down body reflected in polished stone came back to her – so much less compared to the beautiful, vibrant young woman he had last seen her as. He was just as heartbroken to see her this way as she was to see him, Minazuki believed that.

*\*I understand you're still upset at me.\** As if that weren't the most unfathomable understatement *\*I'll go, but if you ever want me I'll be here.\**

He tried to go, but when he made to lift her and set her aside she clutched to his shirt tight, squeezing her eyes shut. So pathetic, so childish she was just wanting him to be there. But there was nobody else who could come close to understanding.

He was kind, for once, and sat with her in silence for quite a long while.

"Wha... happened to me..." She murmured, not even sure if he'd hear. After so long with this hole in her mind, she just hoped that maybe he would have an answer. Even a REVOCS lie, anything to help her fill in that void in her memory.

*\*What do you mean?\**

"I can't remember anything. Any of what happened when I was wearing Rosuketsu. It's all just... blank. But I feel – I *know* that without whatever was there I..." *I'm not whole? Can't feel any joy? Have nothing to live for?* All the possible conclusions to that idea had been rattling around in her for so long, but she didn't seem to need to commit to any one of them to get the point across. "What did it *do* to me?"

*\*I see. We wondered, actually, exactly how much you understood. Minazuki, what you experienced while wearing Rosuketsu was a vision of paradise. It was given to you in exchange for the use of your body. Pleasure overwhelming the body, but what exactly you saw nobody can say. It is said that it is beyond human comprehension. \**

Minazuki nodded. Just as she had suspected. She had let herself become a puppet for something huge and evil and beyond her comprehension, and it had wrung her dry. And yet without it, there was nothing left to live for

*\*Did that make sense to you? I can bring you some scripture about it if you want. \**

She nodded and softly said, “Uh-huh.” But mostly she was lost in thought. Oh, how she wished she could just remember, could just go back to that unfeeling bliss. In the face of that, everything else in her life that had come before was a joke, just frittering around wasting time.

*\*It's okay if life is pointless without it. It is the paradise that was promised to all of us, if it weren't for Ryuko. The best thing a human could ever ask for. Honestly, it's amazing you've been able to recover even this much, the doctors all thought your mind would snap completely. \**

~~~~~

He would come back regularly after that. Minazuki didn't particularly care, or miss him when he was gone, not now that he'd basically confirmed her suspicions. But at least she could rest a bit easier, knowing how exactly she'd been broken. He brought her the holy books, marked with sticky tags where Nui or some lesser couturière had written about the euphoria, the endless bliss that overtook those who submitted to their clothing. She hardly touched them, no point. Books full of lies, written to convince puppets like her that what they were doing was right.

When he was there, though, she found it hard to ignore him. Just the presence of another person, her brother and lover no less, woke that animal instinct in her that even utter joylessness couldn't defeat. Just as she couldn't stop herself from eating or drinking, she couldn't stop the cold comfort he brought – her body still wanted to live even if her mind was broken.

They didn't really do much. Sometimes he just read while she laid there, absently holding his hand. Sometimes they ate together. Every so often they even talked, stilted conversations about nothing in particular. Mercifully, Takamori never tried to coax her to be more active or do anything, especially not anything that would help REVOCS. There didn't really seem to be any reason he kept coming. Compared to the constant urgings of the nurses, it was oddly comforting.

And they did eventually end up having sex. There wasn't really any reason or passion behind it, it just sort of happened. She began to fall asleep in his lap as he read, so he lifted her up and laid her in her bed. Something about the way he looked her, a care that extended beyond pity, that made her grab his hand. “Bastard,” She murmured as she pulled him down with her. The act of it didn't seem to be particularly satisfying to either of them – it certainly wasn't for her – but at least it wasn't awkward either. Neither of them had any expectations, any hope that things could be like how they were before.

Of course, Minazuki couldn't hear the conversations that happened right outside her door after he left.

“How is she?” The Grand Couturière asked.

~ “*The same.*” ~ Takamori’s digital voice sighed. ~ “*She’ll never recover her will to live, that much is obvious.*” ~

“That much is obvious. Indeed. She’s a perfect candidate.”

Takamori must have rolled his eyes because one of the priests in the Grand Couturière’s entourage said, “She has attained a level of complete submission to her fate that we thought not humanly possible. Even the other test subjects, the other failures, they aspire to become one with the life-fibers. They think that by preparing their bodies they can increase their chances of success, but it is that hubris that dooms them.”

~ “*The life-fibers know our intent, and will not suffer the service of those who would twist them to their own ends, yes I know.*” ~

“And on top of that she is a Kiryuin,” The Grand Couturière pointed out, “With a high compatibility even for your line. She was merely the ideal candidate to host Rosuketsu, but suffering through that has made her *chosen* for this.”

~ “*And yet she would still need to prepare her body, or ‘chosen’ or not she will be destroyed by the strain. How do you expect me to motivate someone with no will to live to exercise? And if I did, would she not lose the submission you want from her? I think we’ve gotten all we can from her.*” ~

The Grand Couturière’s tone became a little more grave, “Lord Takamori, you must not allow your sentimentality to influence your judgement.”

~ “*Minazuki is **dead**.*” ~ Takamori responded forcefully. ~ “*What’s in there is just her body. If I believed throwing her into the machine would result in bringing The Goddess back, I would have done it long ago. **She** was chosen because she was worthy to be the life-fibers’ messenger. Nobody else is. Hoping for that is naïve.*” ~

“Lord Takamori, I think we all are sympathetic to your doctrinal disagreements. But you should try, regardless,” One of the other priests offered, more calmly. “If you fail, then what will we have lost? Ryuko is pregnant, she’s out of the fight. We have nine months – less now – of opportunity.”

~ “*Ryuko will fight if she needs to,*” ~ Takamori said stubbornly, ~ “*Do not mistake her for stupid, we already learned that lesson the hard way. If we push her, she will risk her child’s life to stop us.*” ~

“Nevertheless, as we are we have no chance of defeating her. Do you have a better idea?”

Takamori sighed again ~ “*If only we could have captured her.*” ~

The Grand Couturière laughed, “Now who’s being naïve.”

~~~~~

Takamori occasionally let something slip about what was going on in the outside world. Minazuki legitimately couldn’t tell if he was doing it on purpose or because it weighed so heavily on his mind; he barely seemed to be aware he was doing it. She really wasn’t curious, but one time he seemed so preoccupied that she couldn’t help asking if it would just make him leave faster.

What she saw made her blood boil.

Ryuko being crowned Queen of the Pacific. Giant statues of her and *Jakuzure* and all the rest, immortalized like ancient Greek gods. Ryuko and Satsuki's wedding. Ryuko on TV, being interviewed about the baby she would soon be having.

It was exactly like Takamori had predicted. With Satsuki as the mastermind, Ryuko the beloved public face, and Jakuzure leading the army and cutting down anything in her way they were conquering the world. They had their claws in humanity, and they wouldn't stop until all opposition was crushed.

Those images stayed with Minazuki after Takamori had left. Not like she didn't already know but escaping REVOCS would make no difference. She felt as though she alone was so fully isolated from either side that she could understand it. The Earth had become a battleground between two tribes of aliens. Humans were just puppets to them.

On the one side the cold, inscrutable distance of the life-fibers REVOCS worshipped. So alien that even now Minazuki didn't understand what it wanted, but she knew it could manipulate the human mind and flesh like the mere matter it was. And on the other the kamui, savage demons twisted by bloodlust and hunger for more life-fibers. They were beautiful together, she had to admit – just like the gods they aped. They inspired adoration, that was how they controlled humanity.

Minazuki hated them both. But she didn't explain this new revelation to anyone. To open her mouth and explain it all was so much work, frankly she didn't care to. And Takamori would never understand. He was happy being a puppet. He would never understand that both sides were equally monstrous, equally unstoppable, equally uninterested in using humans as anything other than tools.

It felt right, perfectly fitting with how bleak her world was. And in a way she almost felt proud, that she alone understood that humanity would always been enslaved to aliens. The great dreadful fear of Jakuzure finally gave way to just a sort of regret. If she'd only realized sooner, she wouldn't have tried to escape, would never have given her a reason to ruin her. What sense was there for hating the beast when it acted according to its nature.

Takamori seemed pleased by the slight improvement in her mood. Still, she didn't have any will to move – it was just that she could die at peace with the universe now that she understood the exact nature of its cruelty.

Eventually though, he got her to act with the one tactic nobody had thought to try: just making her move.

*\*We're taking a walk.\** He said, and forced her to stand. As much as she didn't have any interest in going anywhere, she had no interest in resisting either.

He walked her through the labyrinthine corridors of the base to an observation chamber overlooking a wide hall. A training camp, buzzing with activity. Hundreds of women were spread out across the gym equipment, obstacle courses, running tracks, and fighting mats – along with various coaches, aides, drill sergeants. *So he's brought me to see some soldiers train, so what?* Minazuki thought.

He pointed to some of the nearer ones and she saw that wasn't quite it. These weren't ordinary soldiers, each of them had some wound or another. Prosthetic hands, feet, and limbs, eyepatches, bandages wrapped around perforated torsos, wounds more grievous and unique than that. And there was a horrible dullness in most of their eyes that she recognized.

*\*They are all too hurt to fight on. But they can still do something for us, something even greater. They're training so they may attempt to become one with the life-fibers.\**

*Like Ragyo, or Ryuko. Minazuki realized. A goddess.*

*\*We know that it is possible to make a baby one with the life-fibers. That is what happened to Ryuko. But Ragyo willingly offered herself up, and so she was able to ascend as an adult. But one must completely submit to the life-fibers' will and be strong enough to withstand the transformation. We're going to go see some of them try to do that.\**

~~~~~

The next room he led her to was a great cylindrical pit, glowing with machinery and life-fibers up and down into the gloom. Suspended in the center was a ring on sturdy catwalk on which they and a crowd of priests and couturière guards stood, and in the center of that hung a great machine.

The outer carapace vaguely resembled a huge egg, smooth and shiny, opening along a wide seam to admit a catwalk. Minazuki could see that the inside glowed with a clean white light and was filled with a teeming mass of wires and spindly metal tubes and limbs and things, all surrounding a wide splint that hung in the center. The size and shape of a human spinal column and with life-fibers attached, prepared for insertion, it was obvious what that was for.

Minazuki's deafness meant she missed a surprising amount of the experience. There were prayers to be said as the first woman approached this industrial altar – she like Minazuki had lost her arm, but also the leg on the same side which had been replaced with a prosthetic. Before the congregation's eyes she discarded her robes was laid on a stretcher where surgeons slowly and methodically drew a deep red slit along her back. Her eyes went bloodshot with pain – the anesthetic was weak as she had to remain conscious and it did little to help as metal bolts were riveted to her vertebrae. Minazuki shuddered a little as the blood trickled over the woman's pale skin, and more as the surgeons lifted her and less than gingerly installed her onto the spine-splint. Her chest was heaving, but her eyes were set. She was ready, this pain was nothing compared to the bliss of becoming a goddess, subsumed into the life-fibers.

The "egg" sealed shut, and a bright white light spilled out from the seams. It felt like an eternity of waiting, but in just a few moments a klaxon on the "egg" flashed orange-yellow and it began to open again. Minazuki's breath caught, but Takamori looked utterly unmoved.

And the reason why was obviously that the woman was still there, exactly as before. Except the light had gone out in her eyes.

*\*Rejected\** Takamori explained, as if it weren't obvious.

The failed goddess stayed calm, detached, almost accepting of what had happened as she was lowered from the splint and the surgeons swiftly set to work bandaging the gaping wound across her back. But as they wheeled her away Minazuki saw her face contort and grow ugly as she started bawling.

Then came the next. Minazuki assumed she would witness the same basic process – after all if they’d already created one goddess she would probably know. And indeed, at first everything went largely the same. This woman was a lot stockier, weathered the pain even better, and had only a nasty facial scar, a missing eye, and a bum arm from a grenade exploding next to her head. Maybe she stood a chance? Probably not, but Minazuki assumed her odds were better.

That was, until the klaxon light flashed red. Not hard to tell what that meant. Even when you were deaf and couldn’t hear the screams. Or the splat.

The egg peeled open and this time a film of dribbling red hung between its two halves for a moment. Every surface inside was coated in dripping red liquid, smooth and pure. There was nothing solid to indicate it had once been a human except a few white fragments of vertebrae hanging from the splint.

Minazuki had never been amazing at handling the sight of blood. But once she saw that red light and realized what it meant, the dull feeling came back. She almost envied that woman, granted such a quick and utter end.

*\*They say that becoming one with the life-fibers is to experience a paradise that never ends. The Goddess Ragyo lived in a constant state of euphoria and understood all things in the universe. For her, the risk of death was worth the possibility of experiencing enlightenment.\**

*He’s going to ask me to do that.* Minazuki realized. *So this is how they have decided to use me next. Promise me that I can go back to how I was wearing Rosuketsu if I get in that thing.* At once any rekindled affection for Takamori died. He was truly the monster everyone said he was.

*But there’s nothing stopping me. I can make my body exercise until they say I’m ready. And then either I’m like that first woman, in which case I lose nothing, or I’m like the second. And then it’s over.* The possibility that *she* might be the one to do it didn’t even occur to Minazuki. She’d lost everything, and with it she’d lost her fear. This would be swifter death than when Jakuzure inevitably found this place and finished what she started.

*\*Minazuki, I believe with everything you’ve suffered through that you could be the one to do it\** Takamori lied *\*You could become one with the life-fibers and bring a new goddess into this world. And you would be made whole again. You-\** The next line of text started forming, but Minazuki stopped it.

“I’ll do it.”

## Chapter End Notes

For a while, I was going with the plan of really making Minazuki a truly evil villain. But that wouldn’t have been right, both for the themes of this story or for her character arc. Instead she’d become to me a tragic figure (as if a solid most of the characters in this story aren’t tragic figures).

Things will eventually be okay for her. Just not any time soon.





# Chasing a Legend

## Chapter Summary

Surprise, it's maybe not quite the chapter you expected. With the culmination of Mataro's long journey towards wearing a kamui upon us, it was time to really bring it back to some simple bonding between him and Ryuko.

About my update schedule: I'm aware I haven't been able to crank the chapters out quite as fast as I'd like lately. Things have gotten somewhat busy for me, so slight interruptions are probably gonna stay fairly frequent. Rest assured, I will continue uploading as fast as I can, but when real life gets in the way sometimes there'll be slowdown. Sorry about that.

Discord: EnhLut\_spare#5463

April 2068

~~~~~

“Oh, hey bro!”

Uzu's and Seijitsu's eyes shot open in annoyance as Ryuko's voice resounded loudly through the soundproofed meditation chamber. Mataro had crept in quiet as a mouse, but then you needed to be much, much quieter than a mouse to get past Ryuko.

Even when she was supposed to be ignoring such distractions.

“Ryuko!” Uzu complained, “What part of Mataro coming into the room has anything to do with you paying attention to your breathing? I thought you were making such good progress with the pin drop exercise last week, or were you just holding still?”

“I'm sorry! I just usually say hi to Mataro when I see him, I forgot what I was supposed to be doing!” Ryuko's defense was halfhearted and just as exasperated as Uzu, who rubbed his face in frustration.

“Well, that's even worse. In a real meditative trance, you wouldn't even consider doing that.” He sighed, “I'm sorry. Stupid supersenses, guess you couldn't help yourself.”

“Uhh, sorry, that's my bad. Thought it was just Uzu in here,” Mataro, still only part way through the door, sheepishly tried to leave. Right, Uzu had warned him that Ryuko was coming in for meditation lessons (and that she was really, really bad at it).

“Nah, you're good bro. So what, you seriously don't even react when he comes in?” Ryuko asked.

“I know what time he’s supposed to get here,” Uzu answered. “And besides, what I usually do is mindfulness meditation, not trance-inducing. Completely different. And much easier to teach too. Might as well come in Mataro, guess we’re done for the day.”

Mataro did, and started setting up for his daily post-workout meditation session. “So what’re you learning trance meditation for anyway? I mean, we used that in early going of teaching Shingantsu but it didn’t turn out to be that helpful anyway.”

“Wait, *you* know how to do this? How? How do either of you do it?” Ryuko asked, incredulous.

“Ryuko, you have ADHD,” Uzu said, “I mean, I don’t actually know that for sure but at this point it sure feels like it.”

“Oh, and you guys don’t?”

“I’m as surprised as you are.”

“It’s not easy, I’ll say that” Mataro shrugged. He didn’t want Ryuko to feel bad, not when he spent way longer than she had trying and almost gave up on meditation.

“Yeah, no, really not. Believe me I know it’s not really like my thing. I’m just trying to find a way to see Senketsu without blowing my brains out,” Ryuko said.

“Uhh...”

“No, seriously. The way I’ve been going over to the other side is by, like, basically cutting the connection between my human body and the rest of me. With a gun. It’s this special gun that shoots life-fiber starching rounds that stop me from just regenerating right away. But while I’m, um, y’know...” Ryuko trailed off awkwardly. It almost felt like the more days that passed with nothing major changing about her besides a little hunger and thirst, the harder it was to talk about the kid she would soon enough be having. “I don’t know what would happen if my body thought I was dead, even for a split second. And I don’t want to find out. But I noticed sometimes right as I’m going to sleep I get this kinda feeling like I’m slipping over. It’s really hard to explain, it’s like my mind is... unfolding - you know what? It’s sorta like when you’re halfway in a dream. So, I thought maybe if I did that on purpose then I could get back to Senketsu safely.”

“Huh,” Mataro scratched his chin as he sat down. Yeah, it was fairly obvious why Ryuko would want that, though it made him shudder to think of how much she was giving up so she could have a baby. So *she* could have a *baby*. He had to help, if he could. “I kinda don’t wanna ask, but did you try the sensory deprivation tank?”

Uzu shrugged, “Thing’s *been* broken since sometime when we in Indonesia, I never used it much anyway. No clue what’s wrong with it either. I was actually thinking of selling it, honestly.”

“Well hold on now,” Ryuko had no real idea what a sensory deprivation chamber was but it sounded interesting. “Do you mind if I take a look?”

“You did fix Satsuki’s secret service-mobile that one time,” Uzu said thoughtfully. “Well sure, what the harm?”

~~~~~

Uzu's meditation chamber was already a secret backroom in his dojo, so the room behind that where the sensory deprivation tank was held could only be even more secret. White walls and a tile floor matched with the dim light emanating from the tank's round white exterior.

"Kinda like a big person-egg," Ryuko observed, opening and closing the wide lid. Inside was a pool of water easily big enough for a person to float comfortably on (well, a normal person, Ira might have had some trouble). Ryuko tried the control touch screen and found it totally dark and unresponsive.

"So if you went in there you and Nozomi'd be like a sort of Russian nesting doll," Mataro joked.

"Wha- Shut up!" Ryuko, face red, gave him a punitive slap. "So what, it's just not working?"

"Yeah, just one day it wouldn't turn on anymore. There's a hatch in the back."

"Alright, how hard could it be – she said, knowingly - Screwdriver?" She held out a hand to Mataro, who fished around in the toolkit and – not sure which was the right one – gave her about half of them. "Thanks bro. Now let's see here."

She wasted no time opening the hatch and peering inside. However, a look of confusion fell over Ryuko's face almost immediately, "Fuck's all this?". The water filter, climate control, and electrical components were all densely packed in together.

The others crowded around to get a better look. "I dunno, I'm not a mechanic. Neither are you though, so don't worry about it."

Ryuko stuck her hand in and felt around. "Wet," She concluded. "Yup, there's a leak. Maybe all the wires are busted from it too. My work here is done."

"What? Oh, you've gotta be kidding me!" Uzu groaned. "Well, I guess thanks for figuring it out. Man, I hate being away from this place, being honest. If I weren't away so often, I might've caught that. I'll get it fixed so you can try it, maybe it'll be what we're looking for."

"Now hold on," Mataro crouched down right next to Ryuko. "Maybe we can at least find where the leak is."

Before he could put his hands in though, Ryuko slapped them away, "Hey! You're gonna get your stupid ass shocked!"

"Right, sorry, sorry!" He held his hands up and let Ryuko screw the hatch back on, "Just trying to help."

"Dude. You stole an empty TV once. Tech isn't your strong suit, it's okay."

~~~~~

Putting the defeat of Ryuko's mechanical skills behind them, they went out to the main room of the dojo. There was a expert-level free practice session going on and Uzu wasted no time jumping in. He looked so at home, so in his element, that Ryuko at once started feeling wistful for

the days before REVOCS attacked. When she travelled out to visit the front lines and saw him leading the charge, REVOCS zealots dying in waves in front of him while their less faithful conscripts fell over each other in their haste to surrender, that felt right. But it was nothing compared to this.

She sat with Mataro on a bench and watched. “So, how’re ya doing?”

“What do you mean?” Mataro asked, as if he didn’t know.

“Whaddya mean what do I mean?” Ryuko chuckled, “You ready for Friday?”

“Ready as I’m gonna be,” Mataro answered, and that was an honest answer. After years of training, it was almost hard to believe he really was less than a week away from meeting his kamui. And yet it would happen either way. This time, the ceremonies would be smaller, more personal. His this week, Yuda’s the next, and then at some point a few months later, Mako’s.

“Well sure, but are you handling it alright? Keeping yourself busy?”

“Man, I dunno, this’s basically been my life for three years now, give or take. What do you expect?”

Ryuko chuckled, “Yeah alright, stupid question. I just mean – have you picked – nah, nevermind,” Ryuko sighed awkwardly, her way of saying “*this isn’t how I wanted to do this*”. There were words to be said, a last-minute briefing on what he should expect – physically and emotionally – a final confirmation that he really was ready. But Ryuko didn’t know the words, only that she had to say them. Which was so typical Ryuko that it was really endearing to Mataro. He could just picture her, bumbling her way through a serious conversation with Nozomi ten, fifteen years from now. She cared so much, even if she didn’t know how to say it.

So he said, “I’ll tell you one thing, it’s crazy to think how soon I’ll be able to know her,” He motion around Uzu to mean Seijitsu, who in her powered down gi form was right at home in the dojo. “I’ve spent so much time around her, the other kamui too but especially her cuz of how often I’m here training. And I’ve never even spoken to her. I mean, they say she could if she really, *really* needed to, but still. I’m looking forward to that.”

“Yeah,” Ryuko nodded thoughtfully. Of course she too knew there were ideas she needed to express. When he first came to her, she knew exactly why he wanted it. He wanted to feel that power, to be a hero, to be *like her*. But it meant so much more than that, and Ryuko still found herself wondering if he understood. That he was about to make the one most intimate connection of his life, a person created just for him who would make him whole. And when the war was over and REVOCS was destroyed that would be the most important part. Did he want that? He was a *prince* now, did that satisfy his fascination with celebrity, show him there were more important things in life? Or had fighting alongside Nonon and Uzu convinced him that it really was all just adventure and heroism? “Is it alright if I came over ‘round dinnertime tonight?” She finally asked.

“Huh? ‘Course it is, it’s your penthouse anyway.”

“Thanks. Sats has to stay late at Tokyo U. for some kind of convention – for her dissertation or something - so I figured I’d hang around downtown anyway. I mean, I *could* just go to the convention, but then it becomes this whole ‘oh the Queen’s here,’ thing. And then everyone’s just *distracted*, y’know?” She said, and they both chuckled.

“Yeah, that does happen sometimes, doesn’t it?”

“I mean I get it, I am cool,” She said sarcastically. “But that works for you? I’m not gonna come if it’d cramp your style.”

“Are you kidding?” Mataro laughed. “They’re always psyched to see you. So, whaddya want to eat?”

“Oh god, you know to be completely honest I could kill for a burger right now.”

~~~~~

Ryuko’s penthouse, begun as simply a place for her to live and gradually expanded as she brought in friends from college, had in the time since her departure reached its full capacity. Few enough of the original crowd were left – most had graduated - but every tenant had some connection to them, someone to vouch that they would suit the gregarious, laid-back attitude that pervaded the place.

And there was a great deal of veneration for the penthouse’s original occupants. They were, after all, chosen by Ryuko. It became almost a shrine to their stories, steeped in years’ worth of “remember when”, and as stories do the memories of Ryuko’s college days grew in the telling. In fact, compared to the current inhabitants they had been rather sedate. People were able to study there without constant interruptions, and despite what you might hear Ryuko was not up all night, every night with a bottle of gin in one hand a bottle of scotch in the other. In fact, at the time she usually spent nights patrolling the city. And yet these were the standards to which the new generation felt obligated to live up to – no, exceed.

Which meant Mataro was actually kind of the perfect choice to oversee that enduring legacy. Oh, sure, he was off doing kamui training most of the day, and when he was there he didn’t actually indulge too much because he needed to keep his health perfect. But still, his shockingly permissive attitude was just perfect for them. So long as the place was still standing and nobody caused any trouble, just about anything worked for him. Of course if there was trouble, say a fight or someone being a little too handsy with a girl or something, then they had to deal with the indignity of having a scrawny seventeen-year-old kick their ass. People rarely caused trouble.

And even if they did he would’ve been fine. After all, he dealt with Nonon. Drunken frat kids had nothing on that.

So that evening a party of typically excessive proportions was in full swing by dinner time. Sitting room was taken, standing room even was fairly limited. With so much going on Mataro gave up directly hosting – moving around, making sure to check how everyone was doing – he just sat near the edge of the pool where he could see everything going on. Expectedly, this drew the crowd around him, although right now that was mostly a spread of people enjoying the patio.

Tonight the group Mataro was actually hanging around with included a few of his more easygoing high school friends who he was keeping in touch with, a couple of guys from the “high rollers” – business students, mostly, and Tae, one of the last of Ryuko’s original crew. She was a volleyball prodigy who had been the Tokyo U.’s team captain as just a sophomore and her natural combination of looks, loudmouthed assertiveness, and physical resilience to easy living made her a leader among that crew. Presently she was sitting at the foot of Mataro’s longue chair, mixing him a cocktail.

And also, quite loudly arguing with one of the high rollers, “Now look, you’d better just cut this out right now man. I’ve never known Ryuko or any of them to do product endorsement, have you? No, so why would this time be different? And I get that your boss probably told you to at least ask, but you have now so we can move on, right Mataro?”

“Well yeah, but I mean c’mon Mataro,” Not to be so easily deterred, this young businessman could all but see his bold career as top marketing executive for his company, if only he could make this one critical sale. “Mako shouts out products she uses on her vlogs all the time, she even showed off one of our water bottles once. You use our exercise gear all the time, hell the set of weights you have here is one my company’s! And you’ve never had a problem with them, right?”

“Yeah yeah, no Tae’s right, but hold on a sec,” Mataro sprung to his feet, completely distracted by a high-speed flying object he had just detected. “Ryuko’s here.”

And indeed she was, slowing to a halt so she hovered over the patio without even rippling the pool. Missing her was impossible, with her hair glowing a crackling red-orange and her wings spread and blazing. However, this was no official visit and all that light swiftly died down, her clothes morphed into their casual form and her feet daintily touched down with little ferocity or gravitas. “Bro!” She shouted as Mataro leapt forth to hug her. Everyone else went back to their business – they were used to seeing Ryuko doing her thing.

“Oh shit! Tae! Gosh, haven’t seen you since the wedding, and before that... geez, long time no see!” Ryuko exclaimed, noticing Tae and hurrying over to greet her.

“Your Majesty, uh, hello. Yeah, I got my own place, just been coming back every once in a while, y’know, say hi and everything,” Tae’s response was surprised, a little awkward. She unlike the rest of them really hadn’t seen Ryuko much since she’d become queen. She wasn’t used to a Ryuko who blatantly displayed her powers, who no longer slacked around and cut class but instead nominally lead the nation, who wasn’t a serial womanizer but happily married with a little girl on the way. “Oh, congratulations, by the way.”

“Huh? Oh, right! Thanks,” Ryuko smiled, “So, what’ve you been up to?”

~~~~~

After spending some time among the partiers, chatting and reassuring Tae and the others that under it all Ryuko was still Ryuko, she and Mataro headed to the roof. This was much more how Ryuko wanted to talk to Mataro about his kamui, and as a bonus it came equipped with a simple grill on which Mataro was busily fixing dinner. The smell of sizzling ground beef, a simple, unsophisticated aroma, was just *divine* and on a clear evening like this Ryuko felt oddly grateful for the rumbling in her stomach.

“You want an egg on your burger?” Mataro asked, standing over the grill, “Very popular in Indonesia, Yuda and his guys showed me once.”

“Oh, definitely,” Ryuko said enthusiastically. She stretched out on one of the pool lounge chairs and sighed contentedly. “So, you fuckin’ her?” She asked.

Without needing to ask, Mataro knew she meant Tae. Ryuko hadn’t failed to notice that she seemed quite comfortable sharing a seat with Mataro. “Eh, y’know,” He grinned mischievously, then said, “Just on and off, she knows it’s nothin’ serious. What can I say, I’m not opposed to quote-unquote ‘older women’.”

“Nice,” Ryuko said, and they shared a fistbump as she laughed and said, “Can’t talk that way around Satsuki, I can tell you that much. Well, I could, it’s just she’d give me that disappointed look and I mean it’s not like she’s wrong either, it is *kinda* misogynistic or whatever.”

Mataro laughed and made a whip-cracking *\*whpsssh!\** with his mouth.

“Shut the fuck up,” Ryuko chuckled, “You know, you’re not allowed to be a twerpy lil’ bastard when you have a kamui. That’s a new rule I’m making right now.”

“Shit,” Mataro said, acknowledging that if she really meant it that would be a problem for him. “First round ready,” He swiftly and smoothly assembled a pair of hamburgers and slid them onto plates, plopping down on his own chair next to Ryuko. As they ate, he produced from behind his chair a bottle of vodka and took a swig, hissing against the horrible taste. Nobody would dare tell Prince Mataro not to have alcohol (except, of course, his mother), but drinking around adults always made him feel awkward knowing that he wasn’t supposed to. Well, adults other than Ryuko – he knew all about her adventures in teen alcoholism. “I’d, uh, offer you some, but you know.”

“Yeah, yeah. They really got you good with that soldier booze, huh?”

“No carbs,” Mataro proudly tapped the bottle.

“True, gotta stay in shape. It’ll get easier once you’ve got her, kamui burn so many calories it’s crazy.”

“So I’m told. As is, I’ll probably just have the one burger,” He said.

“Really good though,” Ryuko held her plate up illustratively, “I’ll take another.”

“Holy shit, that’s like a feast for you.”

“I know, it’s crazy isn’t it?” Ryuko laughed. “It’s been an... adjustment period, let’s say. I forget to eat, then I eat too much, then Satsuki makes dinner and I’d feel bad if I didn’t eat it all because she made it herself,” She said plaintively. “There was a time last week when I went to lunch with Mako and she got this awesome looking salad – which I know what you’re thinking but this shit had like chicken and some kind of fancy Greek cheese and just drowning in dressing. Just the works, y’know? I kept talking about it all day so what does Satsuki do? She gets me one for dinner, even though I’m way stuffed from lunch still.”

“I mean, that’s very nice of her,” Mataro nodded along.

“Right, and the problem is I can’t just put it in the fridge, the leaves’ll get soggy. So I ate the whole thing and I guess the end of this story is pretty anticlimactic because all that happened was I could barely even stand for the rest of the night but still. Fullest I’ve ever felt,” Ryuko concluded.

“You’ll really forget to eat sometimes, huh?” Mataro asked.

“Oh, sure. I mean, only kind of actually. Cuz usually I won’t eat at all unless there’s an occasion. I’ll just be going about my day, totally normal, and then all of a sudden what’s this feeling? And then I’ll realize ‘Oh my god, I’m like so hungry I’m gonna fall over!’. You know I can still feel faint from hunger like that? Even though *I* don’t even need to eat!”

“I bet Satsuki doesn’t like that.”

Ryuko said, “Oh no, no she does not. She has this whole diet planned out, to make sure I get proper nutrition, it’s really nuts.” What she didn’t say was how miserable she felt, laying there with a paradoxical feebleness racing through her body. The signal from her stomach said she should be starving, even though her powers were strong, her body full of vigor as ever. And she said as much to Satsuki “*No, it’s fine, it just feels that way, I could still lift a mountain if I wanted*” – not untrue, but not useful in dealing with the worried look on Satsuki’s face. She wanted Satsuki to know – believe - it was fine, that she didn’t need to be tended to with special meals and foot massages and water held for her to sip. But what Ryuko didn’t want to admit was that she did need those things, at least so long as she kept forgetting to eat on her own. “On the one hand it’s sweet how she’ll go so hard for me, but on the other... eh...” On the other it made her feel like some fragile object, like she might as well just be checked into the hospital until this was over.

“Yeah no, makes sense. That sounds like something she’d do alright. It’s not like *too* annoying though, right?” Mataro asked. It would have been a worrying prospect indeed if Ryuko had come here tonight to get away from Satsuki.

“No! No, most of the time it’s really cute, actually,” Ryuko’s enthusiasm was back, “It’s just she’s so excited, you can’t stop her. Like, yesterday we’re just winding down the day, not really talking about it or nothin’ and she looks up at me and says, ‘I wonder how young we can teacher her to read,’.”

“Jesus. I mean I guess Satsuki probably learned to read pretty young too. So what’d you say?”

“ ‘What’s this *we* stuff?’ is what I said,” Ryuko responded with a laugh, “And then she says to me ‘You know, there are some prodigal children who learn to speak before they can even walk, and read when they’re not much older.’ And when I go, ‘no way, really?’ she just looks at me and goes, ‘No.’”

“Ha! She got you,” Mataro laughed.

“She did, one day I’ll stop falling for those. Okay but look at this one though,” Ryuko was on her phone, scrolling through pictures, “We went over to the cottage the other day to look through some of Satsuki’s stuff from when she was a kid, see if we wanted any of it for Nozomi. She had like, no toys at all, but look at this,” Ryuko showed him a picture of what looked like a horde of tiny samurai, plastic miniatures, all lovingly assembled and painted.

“Whoa...” Mataro said, “Did she paint all of those?”

“Nah, her dad,” Ryuko said.

“And did she, like, play with ‘em? How do you play with ‘em?”

“She said there were rules, but she never had anyone to play with. Mostly she just set them up, like a freeze frame right before a battle,” Ryuko said, flipping to another photo of a tabletop with painted foam hills, trees made of plastic and green fuzz, a stream of tinted glass, rippled as though it were real water.

“That’s gotta be the saddest shit I ever heard in my life,” Mataro said, and the more he thought about it – little Satsuki alone in her room, taking refuge with toy soldiers, getting them all



ready for a playmate who'd never come – the more he understood what was behind these stories of Satsuki's frantic preparation. She wouldn't – couldn't – let Nozomi's childhood turn out like hers. Ryuko nodded, and Mataro knew she got it too. "She have anything else cool?"

"Oh, yeah, well we decided to take the miniatures home, Satsuki just got super nostalgic about them. And then we also took this," The next photo was of a katana, well really a shrunk one, not much longer than a machete to an adult. "Her first sword!" Ryuko gushed, "I mean, look at this. Tiny little sword for tiny little Satsuki! I mean that's adorable, you gotta admit."

Mataro's response was a little hesitant, though. "Not to say that isn't cute or anything, it definitely is, but it's just a part of me feels like you're just trying to make yourself happy about all this."

That took Ryuko by surprise, "Huh?"

"Well, I mean, I do think you're gonna be a great mom, and you're gonna like it. But like, the part once she's become a real person, when she's like teenage-preteen years. I mean, right? That's the part you'll be good at."

"You think?" Ryuko asked.

" 'Course. I mean, I *never* thought you'd be pregnant, and I can't see how you'll like having to deal with a little baby. Satsuki's the one who's the mom, you're the dad. The 'cool lesbian mom'. Am I wrong."

"The cool lesbian mom," Ryuko murmured. "Yeah, I'd like that." She could picture herself, a little older (or made to look a little older), rolling up like a superhero while a teenage Nozomi and her friends were hanging out, maybe spotting that hastily hidden bottle of sake or the half-wiped off lipstick on her "he's just a friend" guy friend's face and giving her a sly look as she said '*don't tell your mother*'.

"It's just too bad that Satsuki can't get pregnant, or else you'd have no problems. I mean, that's not the worst thing in the world, right? You shouldn't, like, feel bad because you're not psyched about being pregnant," Mataro knew full well how excited his mother and Mako were, and it worried him that they might make Ryuko feel guilty for something she couldn't help, something that was just in her nature.

"Heh, thanks," Ryuko said. "I mean that. I shoulda talked to a guy about it first, because honestly it's hard to find a single chick on Earth who doesn't either think what I'm doing is just the greatest or that I'm doing it all wrong," She chuckled, "Or even both."

"Wrong?"

"Oh, you should've heard Nonon when she first found out, in retrospect pretty hilarious. But like besides her they won't say anything to my face, but I can tell. Like, they think I'm too young, or I don't know what I'm doing, or my heart's not in it. Like the maid who's in charge of the little crew that cleans my room, she's one, and I mean she'd *never* say it but honestly I wish she just would!" Ryuko cut off, sounding frustrated. "Which like, it's not like a single one of those things isn't true, but that's none of their business!"

"Well, what did you think a guy would tell you?" Mataro asked.

“Honestly I really don’t know. What do you think about it?”

Mataro shrugged, “It’s just something you have to get through so you can have the good times later, I guess.”

“Yeah, see? That. That’s the right mindset. Mom said to focus on the things in my life that haven’t changed, and that’s a good idea and it helps, but it’s like still *this* is how things are gonna be from now on?” Ryuko shook her head. “I can’t just pretend that nothin’ changed. Same time though, when I think about how it’s just eight months left it’s a little better. I mean it’s nice, having part of the future settled. Do you remember how I was about making future plans before?”

“You didn’t really have any in high school. It’s too bad your fashion design thing from college didn’t work out.”

“I mean, it still might. When the war’s over this whole Queen thing will be a lot less real work, I really will be mostly ceremonial then. So maybe I’ll have time enough to finally open up that shop, make something other than kamui. But like, what if that doesn’t work out?” In Ryuko’s mind, the irrational possibility of nobody showing up or liking it was still frightening, but even more so was the prospect that maybe she just wasn’t cut out for regular, monotonous work and she eventually just get worn out on it. “Well now I don’t really have to worry about it succeeding or not, either way she’ll give me something to do,” Ryuko patted her still totally flat belly. “And something I can share with Sats, too. When I think about it like that, being a mom doesn’t sound that bad.”

“Huh,” Mataro said thoughtfully, “And what’ll happen to me?”

“Oh, well...” Ryuko started. She immediately understood what Mataro meant.

“I mean, seems obvious I’m coming in on the tail end of this war. Like, strategically you don’t need me, or Yuda either, and definitely not Mako. And I saw how long it took the others to get, like, actually good at fighting with their kamui. Hard to say if I’ll be there by the time Nozomi’s born,” Mataro had absolute faith in Ryuko’s ultimatum, her promise that the moment she was free to fight again she would end the war. “And I ain’t even saying I want to like, save the world or anything. But what does a kamui do without war? It’ll be fun to duel the others, practice kamijutsu, develop my own style. And yeah obviously I can’t wait to get to know her. But without a battle we *need* kamui to win, I mean what is the purpose, anyway. Why make kamui if there isn’t gonna be a war?”

Ryuko frowned. So, there it was, what she’d come here to talk about in the end. “Mataro, when I say that kamui aren’t weapons, I mean that.”

“Yeah, I know, but-,” Mataro started, but was cut off.

“Sure, but you don’t get it. If I really did think kamui were just weapons, I would’ve never needed to get involved. Machines can do the same thing I do, just slower. That’s how they made Saiban, and how my dad made Senketsu,” Ryuko explained, “It’s because their strength in fighting, that’s like nothing compared to the rest of what they give us. When you’re one with your kamui, it’s... well I can’t explain it to you.”

Mataro had heard that before, especially the last part, “But why not? I mean, what’s so hard to explain?”

“Well, it’s just. No, it’s not easy to explain. You have a person who shares everything with you, who knows all your darkest secrets and doesn’t judge you for any of it, only ever wants you to be better. And you know all their secrets too, and it’s the same way where you feel like no matter what you belong with them, they were *made* for you it’s just- it’s just I don’t know man, but that’s what it’s like,” Try as she might, the words failed her. She knew he’d get it once they were together, they all did, but until then how to explain it? “That’s why I say that I think everyone on Earth should get to experience having a kamui. Not because of the fighting.”

Mataro nodded along, thinking that maybe he understood. “It’s not like when people talk about soul mates then, is it? Like, you’re not ‘in love’ with Senketsu.”

“How could I be? I mean, ‘course I love him, but that’s not being ‘in love’. That’d be like being in love with yourself. No, it’s different. When you know someone like you know your kamui, you don’t need to love them. You just kind of... coexist. You can’t be that close to another person, not anyone else.”

“You really don’t think even you and Satsuki are that close?” Mataro asked – sarcastically, as he knew the answer already.

“No, there’s no way we could be. It ain’t about how much you love them, it’s a literal difference in the way it works,” Ryuko said. “Two humans, or, uh, one human and one me, can’t have that kind of bond.” That wasn’t to say she hadn’t wondered about it. Fantasized about it, even. Maybe it was possible for the life-fiber clothes she made for Satsuki to not merely be a kind of branch, a offshoot with but a tiny droplet of her power. Maybe she could change her form to one that could synchronize. It was an illicit kind of fantasy, based mostly on her recollection of Nui’s last moments of life, the bliss and ecstasy in her telepathic voice as she realized she was adorning Ragyo’s body. Not something she could ever do in life, but imagining sharing the bond with Satsuki, harboring her every thought and desire, allowing her to use her power in whatever way she deemed fit, that was a very appealing kind of thought.

Mataro, obviously unaware of that line of thought, went on. “And I want to experience that, I believe you that alone’ll be worth all the training, but still it doesn’t answer what I’m gonna do with myself then. Like, I’ll experience getting to know my kamui no matter what else is going on, won’t I?”

“It will, which I guess is why the way I’d look at it you’d get to do whatever the hell you want,” Mataro seemed a little intimidated by that, pulling a thin frown, and Ryuko said, “Thing is, whatever you do end up doing it won’t really matter. You’ll have her, so you’ll be alright no matter what. Have a career. Don’t. Go to college - I mean, I know you won’t but you could. Travel the world. Really whatever you pick you and her will make it work.”

“Whatever I want... Ryuko you know what was the scariest moment in my life?” Mataro asked.

“No, can’t say I do.”

“It was at the grand festival back at Honoujji. You know the one. I was the only one in the audience who didn’t get all cocooned by their clothes on account of I wasn’t wearing ‘em. So I got a front row seat on the whole thing.”

“Oh god, that’s *right*. Jesus, that must have been terrifying.”

“Sure was,” Mataro chuckled, less than wistfully. “The worst was seeing that you were in trouble though. And then when those *things* got Mako. And I ran away, I mean what else could I do?”

“You can’t beat yourself up for *that* though.”

“I know, I knew there wasn’t anything I could do. But that’s why I started this, that’s why I wanted the kamui in the first place. So that next time I wouldn’t be helpless. Only problem is next time came to soon, and you guys are taking care of it without me again. And I think it’s better for everyone if there isn’t a *third* next time, but now I mean look at you,” He motioned to Ryuko, “You’re gonna have a kid soon. Kinda feels like everyone moved on without me again.”

“Shit. Never thought of it that way,” Ryuko mumbled, almost a little ashamed.

“I mean that’s why it gets to me when people say I’m still too young. Because all the adventures, all the things that are making you guys legendary is what’s happening *now*, and I can’t wish for there to be more of them when I’m old enough because that would mean the world would be in danger again which... I mean it’s not gonna be, right?”

“The life-fiber network will probably one day figure out what’s happening here,” Ryuko said with a resigned sigh. “Senketsu has a way to disguise our presence, blend in with the network – it’ll eventually stop working but I hope that’s not too soon. Either way, that’ll be a problem for him and me when it happens, not for you or your kamui. But for now you’re gonna have a kamui, and be a prince, and not really have to worry about money. I mean, I get where you’re coming from, but that doesn’t seem that bad to me right?”

And indeed, that frank appraisal did cheer Mataro up. Ryuko was right, why worry about what the future would hold? In a few days he would have his kamui, and they would figure the rest out together. “Well no, not when you put it that way.”

“Right? And soon enough you won’t have to play catchup anymore. I mean unless you’re planning to go to college there ain’t that many more milestones to go until you’re like, an actual adult too,” Feeling like her purpose in this serious conversation was done, Ryuko turned to the skyline and said. “As soon as this war’s over Mataro, we’re gonna have real nice lives. The whole bunch of us, we’ll be on top of the world, and it’ll be like it was before REVOCS attacked. Only this time you won’t have to feel like you’re playing catchup. In the prime of our lives – and with everything we’ve got there won’t be much difference between settling down with a family and still living the good life. That’s something mom said to me, y’know, is that I shouldn’t worry that I won’t get to have any fun because I’ll be too busy taking care of a baby. She said, ‘you’re rich, you’ll be fine.’”

“Hah! Goddamn, we *are* rich, huh? That’s maybe the craziest part of the whole thing. And yeah you’re probably right, I think a hybrid baby will get in the way even less, probably. And one day she’ll be one of us too. No, *that’s* the craziest part of the whole thing. Nuts too that probably she’s gonna have cousins around her age too. Not that I’d have anything to do with that, no, that whole settling down thing seems like it’s definitely not for me.”

“Really? Not ever?” Ryuko shook her head, “Swear to god, that’s gonna be one of the things we do right away is get you and your kamui a serious girlfriend.”

“Wait, do the kamui – do they like get attached if you’re in a relationship too? So since my kamui’ll be a girl, will she be attracted to women or –,”

“What?” Ryuko was shocked that he was even asking. “No dumbass, they basically don’t even know what sex is. They’re aliens, all that boy-girl with the voices and everything is just how they present themselves. I’m kinda shocked actually you never asked, like, Uzu or someone about it.”

“It seemed awkward,” He mumbled. After Ryuko got done laughing at that, he went on, “But no, see that’s where you’re wrong. That kind of serious girlfriend stuff that just won’t work.”

“And why’s that?”

“Well – and I’ve thought this through – there’s basically three ways to do this. You’ve got the Nonon and Uzu method, where you date someone who’s in our circle. That way, you know for sure they’re not with you because of the fame and they’re not gold-diggers either, it just works. But that obviously isn’t gonna happen for me. And then there’s the Tsumugu and Aoi, where you were dating before you became famous.”

“Which isn’t really an option for you either.”

“Not unless I wanted to go back to dating my high school girlfriend. And she’s really into synthpop right now so that just sounds *obnoxious*,” He joked. “And then there’s the Aikuro method. Which is where you know that you’ll never know for sure why a girl’s into you, so it’s kinda like how can you get attached? What, don’t look so surprised I guarantee Aikuro’s figured that out.”

“And you think that’s the only option you’ve got?” Ryuko said skeptically.

“Well, isn’t it? I mean, it’s not like it’s the biggest deal in the world, I like hanging around with Tae for now, isn’t that enough?”

“I dunno man, I just feel like you’re being a little harsh on people. Sure, some of them are clout chasers, but you really think that’s *most* people?”

“Most of the chick’s who’d talk to me, anyway. And I mean isn’t that what you were doing before you started dating Rei?”

“No, that was entirely different,” Ryuko said, though in truth she wasn’t sure it really was. “So, you’d say what I do now is this supposed ‘Nonon-Uzu method’, huh?”

Mataro waved his hand, “No way, you’re *Ryuko* and *Satsuki*. It’s completely different. I mean I was as shocked as anyone at first, but the more I think about it the more I’m sure. It had to be this way, you belong together. You’re soul mates.”

“You really think so, huh?” Ryuko said. Of course, she liked to think she believed that – that was more a matter of whether she believed soul mates existed at all. If they did, then she had one, and it was Satsuki. But for Mataro to believe it, *we really are legends in his life*, Ryuko realized, *do all younger siblings feel this way?* “Well, you might be right. Oh, speaking of, she should be about done now.” Ryuko took out her phone and prepared to call her, “You want I should invite her here? She can eat that last burger you say you’re too full for?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

When Satsuki answered Ryuko's call she immediately said ~ *"Ryuko they have complementary pens here, should I grab one for you? They're gel-point, look pretty good quality, and they've got this really cool swirled blue glass texture and the words 'Graduate School of Social Sciences 115<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" on them."* ~

"Oh my god yes please. I thought you'd say I have enough free pens, honestly," Ryuko's voice, suddenly much sweeter than when talking to Mataro, made it clear just how endearing she thought that was. *See? Who else could wring that out of Ryuko over a pen,* he thought.

~ *"Well at this point, you might as well try to collect them all. Are you still at Mataro's?"*

~

"Yup! You wanna come by? There's still some dinner, and you and he could have a drink or two?"

~ *"You won't feel horribly jealous? No? Then that sounds lovely,"* ~ Satsuki said as though the thought hadn't even occurred to her.

In no time at all she'd arrived and joined them on the roof, snuggled with Ryuko, watching the city make its transition from the glint of the setting sun to the starlike glow of all its myriad lights at night. One thing that made Mataro deeply glad to have his sight back was taking in a view like this. Shingantsu just didn't do the *scale* of it justice.

All those little lights, all those people. They all knew his name, it occurred to him. They all knew what was going to happen to him in just a few day's time. Some of them even thought that he was becoming a god. But they all knew that whatever was going to happen to him it was only fitting and proper because he was the prince – the prince! This, insane as it sounded, was the capital of an empire, and he was a member of it's ruling family. And right there next to him was, well, she acted like she didn't know it – such an innocent expression on her face as she chowed on her second burger – but she knew none of this would be there if it weren't for her.

*You know, Ryuko's right. This is a pretty good life. And it's only gonna get even better.*

# Young Blood

## Chapter Summary

Discord: EnhLut\_spare#5463

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2068

~~~~~

There were lots of different ways to awaken your kamui. Accidentally, in the dingy confines of your ruined home's basement. By force, ripping them from their top-secret containment chamber. Methodically, as part of a carefully constructed lab experiment in a sterile test chamber. Or with great fanfare, in front of an audience of thousands. But what was the *right* way to do it?

Definitely none of those.

Satsuki had wandered out onto the balcony of her office, where Ryuko was idly sketching and enjoying the spring air and asked if she wanted to make any change to the ceremony for Mataro. Her instinct response was, "Nah, he'll really like it," thinking to herself that he probably expected the arena and the crowds and the cheering and that was the only way to make sure it felt official.

"I don't doubt that, but I was just thinking that it might be a bit overwhelming for his kamui. Wouldn't it? I'm not sure but won't it basically be the moment she's born?"

And obviously that was right. *Goddammit Ryuko, of course you can't let that happen again.* At the time it had seemed fitting, but after taking part in more than her fair share of vast ceremonies Ryuko knew it was a propaganda move. Scaring the shit out of REVOCS wasn't the point. She immediately sat up and said, "I've got some work to do." And when she called the kamui, started asking them how they would want it if they got a do-over, what she needed to do became obvious.

They made a new pavilion, deep in the overgrown, untended woods of Noyamakita park on Tokyo's outskirts. Well, as always construction workers made it, but Ryuko was more that capable of making a sketch to show them what she wanted. It was really quite simple. Just a circle of perfectly fitted stone, a raised circular platform in the middle that could only be described as an altar, with rows of fires lit in metal bowls encircling the platform and delicate lantern-shaped statues holding white flowers around the base of the stairs. There weren't even any paths through the blooming cherry blossoms and whispering pines – someone without a kamui (or a kamui wearer to carry them) would find it fairly difficult to hike to. This was a secret place, so that even though

everyone in the world knew the day that the little prince was “ascending” there would be no unwanted observers.

It was much better this way, everyone agreed. Oh sure, transforming for the first time before an audience of thousands was exhilarating, but for the Kamui... well it was quite overwhelming. The roar of hundreds of thousands of distant, faceless humans in the distance was a jarring distraction in the very first moments of their “birth”. In fact, they all fessed up after some needling from Ryuko that it took a little bit of shuffling through their wearer’s memories to really believe that they *weren’t* literal gods, and even then, the feeling of titanic expectations thrust upon them didn’t quite go away. No, that wasn’t right, and that wasn’t how things would be. It had to be only about Mataro, his kamui, and the bond they would soon share. And a place like this made it clear how beautiful and sacred a thing that was.

Well, maybe not only about them. The rest of the kamui corps, Ryuko and Satsuki, and of course his family were all there too. In fact, to make it feel a little more special, more solemn, they all got there before Mataro. But they had just as much a right to be there too, in fact once everything was set up and they were waiting around, letting the kamui talk it felt like the humans were only there to accompany *them*. After all, they were welcoming a new member of their family into the world.

~~~~~

He had no real right to be there. Shaking on Honnouji’s cold concrete bleachers as around him the world began to end. An ordinary, sniveling fourteen-year-old boy had no place hiding among the pulsating, ruby-red cocoons under Ragyo’s brilliant, cold light. Mortal eyes didn’t deserve to witness what happened there.

And yet Mataro had a front row seat to see Ryuko sailing over the walls, to see Satsuki stabbing her mother through her still-beating heart. To see them face down impossible odds together. The world would never know or understand what really happened in the arena that day. Even Mataro knew he couldn’t really understand what it was like. That was their moment. When they learned what they were truly made of.

*And that will come for me. Every step I take I make it more and more certain. Ryuko and Satsuki faced it at Honnouji, Nonon faced hers at Krakatoa, they all will face it eventually. Maybe it won’t be in this war, but there will be another one day. My moment will come too.* This is what was in Mataro’s mind as he climbed the wide stone steps the altar. An altar at the peak of which *she* stood, propped up by a wooden stand like a suit of armor. He felt like it was all running in slow motion.

Wakaiketsu – “young blood”. That was the name he had thought up for her. Simple, fitting, to the point. A good kamui name. Now he could only hope she would like it.

The thought of that final trial he was now all but destined to undergo should have frightened Mataro. He certainly didn’t want to worry about something like that. Usually, there were only a million reasons why wearing a kamui was simply the greatest thing ever.

The morning had start with him *vibrating* with anticipation. His family had stayed over at the penthouse, and out of sheer respect his many roommates were giving them a wide berth, so over breakfast he got to hear his parents and Mako bubbling about how excited they were for him and how after it was done, they were going to go back to the lake mansion for the biggest party with the whole family. *It’s almost like this is my high school graduation, the way they talk about it*, he thought.



But on the ride over, it began to sink in. Looking out at the city passing by, he thought, *I probably won't even know it when it comes. Probably lots of ordinary people have their moments too, jumping into a frozen river to save a drowning kid, or lost alone in the wilderness and forced to survive. I could do those things, I've done way more crazy shit than that, but only because I've been trained. If I were just a regular joe, would I be brave enough to do that?* There was no way to know, so the best he could do was put on some music and try to tune it out, focus on the undeniable fantasy of wearing his own kamui and how soon that would be all his. The glorious battles, the world's adoration, the fucking *girls* who'd be all over him. That didn't help though when he had to take the final leg of the journey on foot, walking through the woods with a growing sense of... dread, almost. No turning back now, and nothing to think about but what exactly he'd gotten himself into.

But when the trees parted and the scene sunk in, things changed. For one thing, seeing her for the first time was a profound relief he didn't even know he was looking for.

Because she looked pretty damn cool.

*I knew Ryuko wouldn't let me down.* With all the other kamui taking the forms of military uniforms, suits, and dresses while powered down the possibility that Wakaiketsu's form would take some getting used to lingered in the back of Mataro's mind. Ryuko knew him better than that though. She knew that even if he'd long since banished the instinctive shame of nudity he would feel another, much more personal shame bonded for the rest of his life to some stiff, starched ensemble of ribbons and epaulettes. That just wasn't him.

The final design was both clearly inspired by the popular streetwear fashions of the day and also uniquely and obviously kamui. It consisted of a long jacket, undershirt, and long pants with matching ankle wraps and shoes. The sleek grey jacket consisted of two layers, the outer and shorter of which was tough, thick, and weather resistant looking with parallel lines of bold yellow running down the shoulders and sleeves. Undeneath that, the lower made up the ends of the cuffs and hems and sported a yellow and orange flame pattern that evoked the style of kimono embroidery. It was clearly meant to be worn loose, secured by a chain, for it was on the smooth white of the high-collared undershirt that the faint lines of closed eyelids sat. The pants that completed Wakaiketsu's design were matched the jacket in color, a cool grey and clearly made out of the same tough but flexible, almost canvass-like material. They had the same yellow stripes along the sides and hems and white knee patches, along with wide, utilitarian pockets that laid flat against the thighs. Around the ankles they tucked into a pair of foot wraps made from a black fabric with yellow borders. Those also looked great to Mataro – they could fit under any shoes but still afforded excellent grip and flexibility for barefoot sneaking and scrambling.

So why didn't it frighten him anymore? How could it? The sun was glittering through the trees, the same breeze that gently rustled Wakaiketsu's hems was setting cherry petals adrift in the air, and before him the kamui corps parted, disciplined and solemn. They stood at attention and presented arms with their panoply of shimmering blue-black blades. And beyond them Ryuko stepped aside, graciously waving him through with a smile that would have looked tongue-in-cheek if all her glowing hair and wings didn't make her look like the sun goddess she denied being. Mataro could practically feel the power crackling off them.

This wasn't the world of grey concrete and boring reality of the city skyline in the distance. He'd been transported into something much more ancient. A world where magic and heroes were real, the world warriors lived in. People in this world weren't afraid when their

moment came, Mataro finally understood. It was their chance to find out if they'd ever really been alive.

*But ancient warriors were alone when their moment came. I won't be.*

~~~~~

There weren't really any words to be said before the ceremony. That was by design, they'd all been sure Mataro's patience would be (understandably) outmatched by any preamble or long speeches. He turned and hugged his parents and Mako, then disrobed and strode between the rows of the kamui corps. He'd brought his sword and was wearing it sheathed on a strap over his bare shoulders, and when he passed them Satsuki stepped forward from next to Ryuko with its counterpart. She held the sheath and allowed him to draw it, revealing a twin to the ninjato Nonon had given him after the battle of Krakatoa. He raised it high and lowed it, tip held vertical in front of him, hand pressed against the side of the blade to admire its perfection. He had to try very hard not to chuckle to himself at how *fucking cool* this was. He noticed the one major difference was a slotted pommel, so that it could latch perfectly together with his other sword. Not that different from the halves of Nonon's naginata, and while every single one of them could be considered his mentor in one way or another it felt like a fitting homage.

But with that, it was all up to him. Climbing past Satsuki and Ryuko, Mataro finally reached the top platform and stood face to face with his kamui. Well, face to eyes. There was a small ceremonial knife – like a letter opener – tucked into the bottom of the wooden stand. But why use that? He already had a sword in his hand. With a deep, determined breath he twirled it in a flourish and sliced it in a perfect line right past his free hand. It almost looked like he'd missed, but a splash of blood flew from a perfect, thin slice across his fingertips. It sprayed across the short distance from him to Wakaiketsu, briefly stained the perfect white of her undershirt, and then faded in and was gone.

The change was instant. Everything lurched. Mataro stood, frozen with his arm extended in the follow-through from his swing. The whole world faded away as a new sense suddenly opened up inside Mataro's head. He was aware of *her*.

*So, this is what Ryuko meant*, he thought as this sudden wall of sensation hit him. It was as though he had been blind before, there was an instinctive reaction beyond joy to suddenly being granted this new ability to perceive. It quite simply made him gasp in shock. And it was only amplified because what he felt through this new connection was just that same feeling, but an order of magnitude stronger. After all, she was gaining the sense not just of Mataro, but of everything. *Of herself*.

"Holy..." Mataro murmured to himself. He straightened up and prepared himself as her eyes slowly fluttered open.

And they knew each other.

Mataro could've broken down crying. God, he'd had no idea. There weren't words for what he saw in those vast, deep eyes - where some of the other kamui had fleshy, yolkly eyes or glassy, crystalline ones or fiery, blazing ones hers seemed to extend inward, on and on like a whirlpool. It wasn't that he knew *about* her, he couldn't list likes and dislikes, what kinds of jokes would amuse her, her thoughts on politics or philosophy or whatever. No, they just *knew* each other, as though they could at all times perfectly imagine what it was like to be each other. No

wondering what she was thinking, no feeling like he was a separate person boring into her eyes at such a short, intimate distance. No wonder Ryuko had such a hard time explaining it.

And because he knew exactly what she was thinking, he didn't need to say a word before continuing to the final step in the ceremony. He extended his – still slowly bleeding – hand for her to climb onto him, transform, and become one.

Only, he did partially expect that she wouldn't do that right away. And that was exactly what happened.

*[What?]*

“What?” Mataro responded, shocked and confused at the mere experiences of telepathic thought.

*[What do you mean what?] The voice in his head, probably unsurprisingly, was a lot like Mako's. High pitched and ready at any moment for a sudden, emotive outburst or swing. But he could only think of a few times he'd heard that raw sarcasm in Mako's voice. [You just wake me up and it's all 'climb aboard!' Don't I get any introductions? Any 'what am I', 'where am I', 'what the hell am I doing here?' I think that'd only be fitting, wouldn't it Mataro?]*

Mataro, suddenly keenly aware that Ryuko and all the kamui could hear all of this, looked around uncomfortably and whispered, “This is a ceremony!”

Wakaiketsu then realized he was right, looking up and beaming over a surprising burst of embarrassment to Mataro. *[Oh, well that's just great! Now we look like morons! You could've told me...]* But, as she took in the presence of the other kamui, she went quiet. *[Holy...]*. She was immediately captured by the sight of an entire tribe of her kind, all radiating warmth and with eyes twinkling with amusement. These were creatures *like her*, and no, they didn't care one bit that she'd messed up the ceremony.

Mataro grinned, “Let's go meet them, huh?”

Now Wakaiketsu didn't hesitate. She slithered fluidly onto Mataro and he descended the stairs. Everyone crowded around, cheering and clapping him on the back while the kamui communed. Wakaiketsu giggled nervously. They introduced themselves in a rough circle, starting with Furashada wrapped around Rei's shoulders like a scarf and ending with Saiban, who delivered his with gravitas due their eldest and leader. She put faces and auras to the names in Mataro's memories as they gave their names, the names of their wearers, and their special powers and transformations – Wakaiketsu didn't need to be told that those powers were important, a source of pride, what made them unique. They all seemed so wise, so strong to her. It was self-evident that they had years of experience fighting and feeding and growing in power. And yet they were so inviting too, as though she were long awaited. She was awestruck.

*[Well, um, I'm Wakaiketsu,]* She started when it was her turn.

“Wait, you are?” Mataro, breaking off from his human conversation with Mako, who was admiring his Kamui's powered down form by lifting open the collars of the jacket to peer at how the flame patterns continued on to the inside – a vaguely ticklish sensation for her. Mataro hadn't expected her to call herself the name he'd chosen as though she already knew it.

*[Well yeah, that's my name, isn't it?]* She said, as though it was obvious, *[And you already know Mataro. Only, I don't know if I have any special powers like that,]* There certainly weren't any in Mataro's knowledge – she was supposed to discover them when she awoke. When the other kamui chuckled at that she indignantly demanded *[What?]*

*[It's only that it's so obvious to us,]* Tekketsu said.

*[Literally blindingly so, wouldn't you say?]* Reiketsu agreed.

*[Nonon's fuming about it, actually,]* Saiban said, clearly trying to needle her, *[You can't tell, I'm sure, but it's true.]*

“Wha- I am so not!” Nonon exclaimed in response.

“You sure? I mean, the one thing that completely negates Saiban's power?” Uzu asked.

In response to that, Nonon caved and growled, “I can't even believe it. Literally infinite possibilities out there. You know don't look so smug; it affects all of you too!”

*[Alright. Now what the hell is it?]* Wakaiketsu couldn't quite decide whether to be shy and deferential or bold – though she clearly wanted to be the latter. Now her patience had worn out.

Nekketsu, who had declined to play into the squabbling, explained, *[Well you see, we can't feel your aura.]*

Mataro gasped, and if Wakaiketsu had a mouth she would have too.

Indeed, it was true, where the other kamui radiated a sort of invisible light, a complex signal that was felt crackling through the air, Wakaiketsu just... didn't. It wasn't a void in their senses, but rather like she kept it all bottled up somehow, and so it felt to the other kamui like there was nothing there at all. If Mataro hadn't been so caught in the moment when she first awoke, he might have noticed that behind him Ryuko and the kamui all perked up in shock and confusion. It was only when their wearers slapped Mataro on the back in congratulations that the aura was conducted through them. But now that she knew, and willingly wanted to communicate she projected a sense of glowing pride out around her.

“No fucking way!” Mataro exclaimed.

“What a fascinating development,” Houka said, “Unless anyone objects, I think ‘stealth mode’ seems like a fitting name.”

“That's what it is,” Uzu shrugged, “Looks like you got stealth mode, kid.”

Mataro laughed at how perfect that was as Saiban casually continued their conversation and said, *[No, seriously, don't you see how this is a problem? How are we supposed to hit 'em?]* At the mach speeds of a kamui fight, sensing aura was far more important than any other sense. Lacking one would make them effectively invisible.

*[Well, there's only one way to find out!]* Seijitsu said, already thinking of the party that evening when they would have the chance to throw down.

*[Now, you have shingantsu. Not a fair comparison.]*

They might have gone on like that for quite a while, but a tinge of drowsiness was starting to creep into Wakaiketsu. She was reaching the limit of how long she could stay awake on such a paltry amount of blood. It would be time to transform soon.

But there was one thing left to do. Mataro turned to Ryuko and said, “And this... is Ryuko.” He thought about saying ‘my sister’, ‘your creator’, ‘the queen’, or whatever. But none of that was necessary. Wakaiketsu already knew the feeling of her well. In fact, being bathed in that soothing warmth was about the only thing she could remember before she awoke. Being so close now to her, magnitudes grander even than the other kamui, was such an overwhelming feeling. Wakaiketsu forced Mataro to drop to a knee, bowing in front of her.

And of course, Ryuko took it in stride and immediately scooped them up in a hug. When she saw Mako and the Mankanshoku parents she waved them over too, and they all dogpiled Mataro together. “Don’t keep us waiting now,” Ryuko said with a smirk, “the Seki-tekko’s that bracelet on your right arm.”

“Right!” Mataro hurried back up to the top of the altar and eagerly shouted, “Stand back!” He flipped the bracelet around his arm, and with the prickle of the needle diving through his skin the whole world was set on fire.

“RRRRRAAAAA-,” He growled at first, trying to contain the shock of the brilliant burning sensation. It was impossible. “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

And a blinding column of firework-yellow flames erupted all around him, furiously chiming as plasma flashes cracked in a great multitude across it. The natural flames in their metal bowls were snuffed out by its grandeur, and the cherry petals streaming through the air whipped away from it in every direction. The brilliant light soared on into the sky, illuminating the city all around even though it was already nearly noon.

As it died down, everyone craned their heads to see. Mataro’s chest heaved, and he straightened up, barely able to open his eyes for all the light. Because he was still glowing quite brightly.

Around his shoulders, Wakaiketsu had transformed into a brilliant cloak, and her eyes sat on the sleek armor plates that fastened it. No elaborate spikes or thick, rounded pauldrons, her profile was entirely streamlined. Across his back, the cloak shimmered and glittered like a kaleidoscope – not quite a full length cape but definitely enough to catch the eye. The inside was composed of the same black void crisscrossed by diving red strands that made up the negative space on so much life-fiber clothing, but the outside was made out of a startlingly reflective material. At the right angle it faded to a matte grey like carbon fiber, but when the light caught it brilliant reflections spilled off it. Even a slight shift caused it to flicker and pulse. If the sun struck the entire thing at once, it would have made them quite impossible to even look at.

The rest of Wakaiketsu seemed to be made of the same reflective material. Short gi pants that tied off at the knees and were secured around the waist by a shining yellow-gold belt whose edges drifted in the air, greaves and skintight, almost sock-like foot covers below that were traced through with bright yellow veins of light. Gauntlets and scaled armor over the arms that almost looked lashed down by cords of the same yellow light. And it all pulsed and shimmered in the light too, like armor made from mirrors. The only thing left bare was his slender torso, save for a glowing golden core right over his heart. And on his head, a wide visor stretched across his eyes from two circular bases on his temples, which erupted into wide yellow-gold wings with detailed

feathers carved across them, rising along with the whipping of his long hair which now was free from its ponytail.

Mataro and Wakaiketsu looked down at themselves and a wicked grin broke out across his face. The very ground beneath their feet trembled, or at least that's how it felt. It was like the entire world bent around the irresistible force.

“Well? How does it feel?” Ryuko asked.

There was only one thing to say.

“Fuck yes. *Finally.*”

After seventeen long years, Mataro finally knew what it was to be alive.

~~~~~

For REVOCS, sending scouts as close to the enemy camp as they dared was always a top priority. Any sign that the kamui might have headed home to Japan or to a different front in the war had to be capitalized upon. This time, around the former city of Luoyang in the center of China's heartland, the word spread between the garrisons of several obelisks that they'd all gone home. Yes, all of them.

It was an opportunity that couldn't be avoided. The reconquest army just seemed to be milling around in the distance, their base too well guarded to be taken. But they wouldn't go on the offense without their leaders. There was no time to wait from an order from high command, the general decided. It was time to detonate the obelisks. Throw the remaining slaves into their gaping maws, summon up magma from deep below the city, and let the fiery wrath of the life-fibers light their way to heaven and send the savages down to hell.

That same general was now pacing around on the top platform of one of the obelisks, in great agitation. He wore the *Praetorian* Ultima uniform model, a powerful three-star though small in size, with a high crested helmet and unfurled armor plates that provided a powerful energy field. Practically a miniature kamui, designed to allow a skilled fighter to go head-to-head with kamui.

In theory. He didn't want to try his luck. Especially not against Uzu. And that was a problem because now word was coming from the south that he was *back*. In Xian right now. And that wasn't that far away. So this imposingly tall gentleman, once a scion of one of REVOCS' European subsidiaries, was feeling an understandable amount of stress. If Uzu found out what was happening here, they would all be dead before they even knew what was happening.

“Can't you get them to go any faster?” He demanded, watching the lurching herd of slaves in their muddy scraps of clothing being driven ever-so-slowly towards the pit of the obelisk below. Idiot that he was, he'd driven them too hard, and now many were dropping dead on the streets before they could perish in a way that served their betters.

His advisor, standing next to him with fingers clenching the guardrail, grimaced and said, “If we had more men, maybe.”

“And you're sure Sanageyama is nowhere near here?”

“I’m certain. The horizon is all clear,” the advisor snapped back a little testily. He wore the *Cossack* model of two-star Ultima Uniform, equipped with wide glowing fronds that extended from its shoulders, enhancing its ability to detect life-fibers. “For the time being we are safe.”

As if waiting for that moment, there was suddenly a piercing scream from down below, and a resounding roar of shock from the slaves. Peering in sudden alarm, the general saw the crowds parting around two men – one a REVOCS soldier, the other just one of the slaves, dressed in rags. Only it was the soldier who was screaming. There was a sword driven through his hand, and in the hand of the diminutive figure clad in rags its twin was pointed menacingly at the soldiers who were rushing over to help.

“Where did he get that! Deploy the garrison at once!” The general’s advisor shouted hoarsely. But maybe he failed to notice something. That soldier had been wearing an Ultima Uniform. And now it was melting off him, disintegrating into loose threads.

No. It couldn’t be.

The other soldiers below didn’t hesitate. But they weren’t nearly fast enough. Bullets ripped through the air and hit nothing but dirt and concrete. And the slave was amongst them, his rags shed, coat with brilliant flame patterns rippling as blades flashed. From his height all the general could watch as those blue-black swords carved with terrifying precision across his men’s ultima uniforms, shredding them and leaving the men to fall howling in pain and shock.

But the rampage was short lived. The crowds parted as the garrison’s elite *Huskarl* wearing couturiere guards, cold faced women with shaved heads, surrounded this mysterious figure. For a second, maybe they could have hoped for victory as more of the regular soldiers rushed to reinforce them, creating a total encirclement. The slaves didn’t try to run yet. Their fear hadn’t been broken.

But then needle-fire poured from every window in the ruined buildings all around. Rockets and sniper fire from hidden alcoves. The reconquest soldiers hadn’t just been milling around. They were already inside the city.

And then, as the couturieres leapt for the kill, the little man erupted. Enveloped in flames that surged high into the air, growing like the blazing shadow of something huge and unfathomable. A horned head on a serpentine neck, wings burning the air. It plunged down upon him, completely devouring a hapless couturiere as it did.

“Holy fuck.”

He didn’t want to watch the rest. But there was nothing else to do. It was a massacre. The *Huskarl* model was meant to give even kamui pause with its enhanced defenses. That didn’t work so well when its wearers were frozen in fear, blinded by kaleidescoping light. One by one they were stripped of their Ultima Uniforms. And around that battle pandemonium broke loose. The slaves surged in ever direction, dragging down REVOCS soldiers with sheer mass. No amount of super-strength could stop them from being consumed by the mob, beaten with rocks and withered, desperate fists until they popped under the strain. And the Reconquest soldiers surged out of their hiding places, wearing the gas masks that had become their iconic uniform since the ashfalls of Indonesia.

“How! How!” The general rounded on his advisor, furious beyond all reason.

“I don’t... I don’t understand. This isn’t possible.”

At that moment, a soldier burst in from the stairwell, breathlessly exclaiming, “Sir!”

“I know!” The general roared back.

“They’re... it’s.... tearing through us like... steel fucking lightni-Gah!”

Before he could finish a blinding light sailed over the side of the platform, and from within it a shimmering sword flew and lifted the soldier perfectly by the shoulder of his Ultima Uniform pinning him to the wall for a second before it popped, and he dropped naked to the floor.

And there stood Mataro, balanced perfectly on the platform railing, a grin of merciless glee on his face. “Sup. I ruin your little party?”

The general’s mouth hung open. There was no doubt, that was a kamui. Those endlessly deep eyes, that irrepressible glow. The hunger in this – this *boy’s* wide, amber eyes. But this wasn’t *any* of them.

No, no there was no way. This was a new kamui. They were making *more*! High Command had to be warned!

It didn’t occur to the general, that there was no chance in hell he’d be the one to deliver that warning.

“Who are you!” He demanded, “Answer me!”

Mataro chuckled. “Oh, I’m sure you know,” the general and his advisor looked stupefied. “C’m on, really?”

“... *what.*”

“Oh, for the love of – okay, fine, whatever. We are Mataro Mankanshoku and Kamui Wakaiketsu!” Mataro bit through a little annoyance and delivered his line with a flourish. “The Prince of the League of The Pacific!”

“... *You’re* Mataro Mankanshoku? But you’re just a -,”

“I *am*. Geez, no wonder it was so easy to sneak in here. And you, buddy, have a great honor on your evil head,” The grin was back. The predatory gleam in their eyes. “You’re going to be the first life I take.”

Thinking that he had stalled enough for the gauntlet-mounted energy cannons in his Ultima Uniforms to charge up, the general leapt at Mataro, firing at point blank range with all the precision he could manage. It wasn’t nearly enough. Mataro scurried right over his back, sliding across the metal floor to recover his other sword.

“Oho! Not so stupid as you look!” He chuckled.

“Fuck you. I *will* send you back to hell, demon.” The general reached behind his back to unsheathe a huge two-handed longsword, blue-black hardened life-fibers.

“Stupider, actually. Now I get to make an ass out of you in front of all your lackeys.”



Mataro's adversary surged forth, summoning a burst of speed that shouldn't have been possible for such a large man wielding such a large sword. A flurry of devastating blows cared through air and metal before him, but he couldn't land a blow. He didn't realize how much kamui fighting relied on aura sensing, at least not consciously, but his instincts were simply useless. Mataro nimbly sidestepped every strike, pretending to dither and stumble to goad him further. Finally, he let the sword come down right next to him and kicked it out of the way, sliding past the general and dexterously drawing a sword right across his hamstring. As the hulking REVOCS cultists stumbled and grimaced Mataro flipped around and sent a strike right at his forehead, which he barely managed to deflect. Now the met head on, blades clashing, and to the general's horror he couldn't overpower this scrawny teenager. No, this was what kamui were.

This boy was *stronger than him*.

And he never saw the blow that killed him. His energy cannons were done charging, and at the next opportunity he unleashed a blast of gamma beams that plasmified the air with brilliant purple-white light. It sailed right past Mataro, but as it passed his cloak the reflection was so blinding that it was visible from the ground hundreds of feet below. All the general knew was the unbearable pain of a sword through his heart.

As his vision – briefly – returned, he saw a quiet look of shock on Mataro's face. It didn't last long though. He withdrew his blade, satisfied. As the world faded away, the general could hear the distant hysterical screaming of the naked soldier huddling in the corner. Then the back of his head hit the floor and everything went black.

"Huh. That wasn't as bad as Nonon warned me," Mataro shrugged. He turned to survey the battlefield and said to Wakaiketsu. "Fucking cool, right?"

*[You know it.]*

"Damn right. Told you we'd make a perfect team.

*[As if I ever doubted. He wasn't too bad, actually. I mean, compared to Seijitsu that was nothing, but for what it's worth,]* Wakaiketsu said as she drank in the remains of his ultima uniform.

"Yeah, 's true. Pretty fun. Fistbump?"

*[How do we-]*

"Here, check it. I do the left, you do the right," He made a fist with his left hand and raised it, and she puppeted his right arm to do the same. They crashed them together in front of him. "Booyah! See, that works, right?"

Of course, that was the exact moment that the advisor decided to try his hand. Drawing a hardened life-fiber knife, he lunged for Mataro's back. Wakaiketsu, struck by panic, forcibly whirled Mataro around and punched him in the face with all her might.

His limp body hurled backward out over the obelisks pit, struck the side of the lead plug, and stuck with a dull *splat*.

*[Oh, fuck]* Wakaiketsu gasped. She thought she should have been horrified, but all that coursed through her was satisfaction.

Mataro shrugged. “Rough. But I’ve seen worse ways to go. Trust me, these REVOCS commander types don’t deserve much sympathy. Now, what was I just thinking? Oh yeah,” He walked over to the soldier panicking in the corner and said, “Steel lightning, was that? I don't even know what you meant by that, but it's pretty cool. Mind if I borrow that?” The man just kept on screaming. “ ‘kay, sounds good. Spread the word now, you hear? The Prince has come to set everyone free.”

And the word did spread. Of course, it grew in the telling. The Young Prince was the most noble, fair-haired youth any had ever seen, and appeared in a burst of angelic light if you prayed for Ryuko to send him to save you. A far cry from the reality of Mataro swaggering his way across the battlefield, invisible even in plain sight, taunting his enemies as he cut them down. But what was accurate was the stories REVOCS soldiers told each other of his twinned sword *Steel Lightning* plunging from the sun right when you least expected it, cutting down their commanders before anyone even knew what was happening. They called him “Matoi’s own assassin”, but they could have no idea how true that moniker would become in time.

## Chapter End Notes

The idea with Mataro's abilities was definitely to be "stealth focussed", but do it in a different way that was gaudy and ostentatious. I really like it, I hope you all do too.

And if you want to hear what I imagine Wakaiketsu's voice sounds like, look up Mako's english dub voice actor (Christine Marie Cabanos) doing an interview or panel and just talking in her normal voice.

# Not Built for Battle

## Chapter Summary

UPDATE: As I warned, the end of the semester is turning out to be a real slog. The next chapter will be delayed a little longer. Sorry about that!

May 2068

~~~~~

The practice mat in Uzu's dojo was wide enough that groups of varying skill levels could practice various martial arts in complete harmony. On a typical day there could be at least three things going on. A kid's class full of enthusiastic but uncoordinated grade schoolers busily hacking away at each other. The teenager's team warming up for a tournament in disciplined rows. The masters who ran the place having an advanced practice session, a pair of them dueling while the others watched and analyzed.

And sometimes, you could add onto that Uzu and his friends practicing on their own. Most of them did their training in the kamui arena, but for some who enjoyed the simple artistry of "mortal" swordplay the dojo held its own appeal. If for instance Uzu had Satsuki, Tsumugu, Mataro, or Ryuko to duel (well, Ryuko was temporarily off that list), everyone present would be treated to such a show of raw skill that it might well derail the entire dojo as they stopped to watch. A dervish of battle, surpassing even the masters, turning the basic ingredients of shinai, mat, human bodies into a blur of fluid motion. They were lucky to witness a level of technical accomplishment that even over the entire course of human history was quite rare.

On this day though, it was just Ira and Mataro trying teach Mako how to wield a sword.

"No, no no it's still not right!" Mataro huffed, dropping his sword and casually dodging as Mako swiped at him. "Your form is... fine, it's fine, I guess, but you'll never land any hits that way!"

Mako pouted, "Well I thought it was pretty good!"

"Yeah, but you still didn't hit me, so..."

"That's only cuz you're better than me, come on!" Mako protested. Other people might have come up with other excuses, unwilling to admit that they simply lacked the skill. That wasn't Mako's style.

*[Imagine not even wondering **why** we're better than her,]* Wakaiketsu groaned and posed to concept to Mataro as though it were some deeply insightful philosophical statement. It did feel like a summation of the day's fruitless efforts though. Still, here they were. Through Wakaiketsu's frustration Mataro found it so much easier to explain the thoughts they both shared. Of course,

they were going to help Mako for as long as it took. But *[It's like she knows we're stuck here with her and she's trying to drag it out as much as possible!]*

Mataro rubbed the bridge of his nose and pointed with his boken to Mako's as he explained, "Ok, but then why is that? It's because you just rush at me swinging wildly, you don't think about what I'm gonna do. You have to get in your opponent's head, try to mix up your moves, trip them up. Also, you do this thing where you tilt your wrist, so you keep swinging at me with the flat side of the boken."

"Ohh! I so do not!" Mako protested with a gasp. She took a couple of aggressive two-handed swings to demonstrate and looked to Ira forlornly. Of course, out of Mataro's critiques that was the part she chose to focus on. She knew full well that the other part, about her not being able to predict Mataro's moves, was completely right. But what could she even do about it? It was such an insurmountable task. Mataro was like a brick wall to her – it was honestly creepy how her little brother could be so calm, so deft. That's what a kamui wearer was supposed to be like, but how could *she* undergo that same transformation? And Ira was obviously just humoring her, not that she could blame him.

He watched her swing, nodded and then said to Mataro, "You know, maybe a mace or hammer or something would be more her speed. Something like a baseball bat, so there isn't an edge to keep track of."

"Yeah, that'd probably be better," Mataro allowed, "She does have a mean line drive."

"Oh, totally! Just gimme a hardened life-fiber baseball bat and then I'll show ya!" Mako exclaimed, mood immediately back up. She sprang enthusiastically into a batter's stance and took a couple swings.

"Here, let's try it again," Ira said, taking Mataro's place squared off against Mako. He gave her a tender, reassuring smile and broke it down like it was the simplest thing in the world – a routine they'd gotten used to over the last months as he'd helped her learn various exercises and hone her body to wear a kamui. "This time I'll go on the attack, and you focus on blocking. I'll keep the same pattern over and over again. There's going to be an opening, and you keep going until you see it and take it. I'll start with the simple striking form, just men, dou, kote, alright? Then I'll do something different after you hit me."

"Got it!" Mako said, huffing seriously as she took up a dramatic ready stance.

"You got this Mako!" Mataro yelled from the sideline.

However, Ira's very first swing only led to him freezing with a puzzled frown. "N-no, you're meant to block with the edge at an angle, let it slide away. Not head on like that."

"Owie..." Mako flinched, wringing her hands in pain. She had held up her boken at a totally perpendicular angle, which sure did look like a dramatic clash but only served to transfer all the shock directly down into her arms.

"Yeah, see?" Ira dropped his sword and hurried over to take Mako's dainty hands and try to soothe away the pain. "You do that you'll hurt yourself. I know, I bet you've seen Ryuko do it, but the only time you're actually meant to do that is when you've worn the opponent out and you're trying to batter them all the way down. That's what she was doing."

Mako shook her head obstinantly at that, “Nuh uh! I saw her and Satsuki clash like, ten or twenty times when they first fought! You were there!”

“Yeah well,” Ira chuckled, “They both thought they were about to wear each other down. You know how they can be.” Mako laughed with him at that. “They were obviously wrong, but then that’s the kind of risks you can take when your other skills can make up for it.”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya,” Mako said, taking up her ready stance again, a bit more relaxed and comfortable now. “Righty! Let’s go again!”

After a little while of this going on without much progress (Mako spotted the opening but couldn’t quite figure out how to get to it without getting a gentle bop in return) Ryuko came out from the meditation chambers, looking about as frustrated as she typically did after trying to contact Senketsu. Ryuko’s hair was wet and matted from the sensory deprivation tank, and if you looked closely you might notice that she’d made a slight adjustment to her royal garb – it no longer had an exposed midriff.

She watched the practice with a wistful expression until Mako looked over and caused her to break out in a grin.

“Hey Ryuko!” Mako bounded off to give her a hug, “Any luck?”

She shook her head, “Man, I wish. For a sec there I almost thought I had it too. What?”

“Your hair’s still wet,” Mako pointed out with a giggle as they separated.

“Huh? Oh! One sec,” Ryuko said and without a second thought her hair suddenly burst into its full radiance, glowing bright orange and standing on end before fading down. It was now returned to its typical fluffiness, though maybe a little messier than how she typically kept it these days. “So, how’s it going?”

As one, Mako, Mataro, and Ira all shrugged.

“That bad, huh?” Ryuko concluded.

Ira, naturally being more patient with Mako than her brother could be, said, “Well, I don’t know about bad, but…”

“I’m *trying* Ryuko, I really am! Square one over here, what’m I ‘posed to do?” Mako concluded apologetically.

“I know you are Mako, don’t beat yourself up,” Ryuko answered.

Mataro, on the other hand, was well and truly frustrated and said, “Can I just – why are we even doing this, anyway? I mean, it takes *years*, I should know, and I doubt I’m on you guys’ level even now, so really what the hell did you expect? Honestly even if she did go for years, she’d never get there without her heart in it.”

*[Mataro shut up!]* Wakaiketsu said frantically, *[You’re gonna make her cry! And then we’re gonna get blamed!]* The second part was what more concerned her, but Mataro did feel a little bad. On the one hand it did kind of sting that he’d worked so hard for years to prove his worth but now that the floodgates were thrown open Mako could just get a kamui with only a little

jogging and weightlifting. But then on the other hand, there were guys staking out her house, her walk to college, her classes with sniper rifles. And that was just unacceptable. And besides, she deserved to know what it was like. *[She can't feel unconfident when she meets him, how would that go?]* Wakaiketsu pointed out, and that was another good point.

But to their surprise, Ira agreed. "It isn't really necessary, that much is true. She needs to hone her body to survive the initial shock, but from a tactical perspective Mako's kamui will just be for her own safety. So combat training is a waste of time, and not really Mako's style, anyway," He said, giving her an affectionate look and a pat on the shoulder.

"Whaaat? Nah, you guys don't get it, you've never fought her," Ryuko said confidently. "Mako knows how to throw down, you'll see. And besides, they *will* want to fight, even if she doesn't now. You two know it's true," Ryuko pointed to Tekketsu and Wakaiketsu.

And on that point, they had to concede. *[Sadly, I suspect that Mother is right. Even if such a sweet, innocent soul has no place near a battlefield, what would our lives be without battle?]*

*[I'm not really sure that's the type of fighting she meant,]* Wakaiketsu pointed out, *[You know how she is with her rule about not fighting anyone that can't fight back. Or, I guess at least not fighting them **for real.**]*

*[Ah. You may be right about that. Where for us, for Ira and for Mataro battle is, well, necessary to defeat our enemies for her it is pure sport,]* And how couldn't it be? They both had the distinctly certain knowledge just from Ryuko's aura that if she was really trying there wouldn't be a single force on Earth capable of fighting back. And that was only becoming truer as lately she'd been growing again, even stronger – every day she visited the research complex just to drink in more life-fibers, and she'd promised to keep doing so until Nozomi was born. *[And if she says Mako has potential in that realm well, I certainly cannot say for sure.]*

"Well Mako, in the end it's up to you," Ira said simply.

And what was Mako to say? On the one hand she'd always known they would have to tie her up to get her to go to war, no way was that happening! It wasn't the heroic adventure from back at Honoujji anymore, you had to kill real people and see some real creepy stuff. The problem with that was obvious. But on the other hand, she could just see how happy it would make Ryuko if her bestie could get into her number one pastime. What was the point of a kamui if she couldn't play with the rest of them? After a moment of humming in thought she said, "I wanna do it properly. Let's keep training!"

"That's the spirit!" Ryuko beamed, and despite themselves Ira and Mataro couldn't quite give up either.

~~~~~

They left the dojo in Ira's car, upgraded from the pink "Elvis" Cadillac he'd wrecked at Honnouji to an even larger, even beefier convertible muscle car. Custom built for him, it was covered in little touches to prove it - an anvil hood ornament, sharply angled rearview mirrors painted with concentric fires like a kamui's eyes. He'd even carried over the huge shoshinsha mark that had previously been spray painted on the pink Cadillac. The mark was that yellow and green shield symbol that stood out on the bold blue hood, most commonly seen as a sticker on the cars of new drivers. Originally that had been a legitimate, if overzealous, attempt to warn people that he was

still learning, but now it was just an ironic in-joke. The car would spawn many imitations - so many things the kamui corps did wound up becoming trends - but nobody would imitate the original blue and gold color scheme. Those were Mako and Ira's colors.

And they both loved it. In fact, all four people in the car at the moment loved it. There was Ira, far more relaxed behind the wheel than the first time Mako and Ryuko had rode with him. Mako had her hand flung over the side, leaning back with sunglasses and a content look on her face. Behind her Ryuko was stretched out over the back seats, casual as could be. And Mataro, well, he was standing straight up on the trunk of the car, arms crossed, bracing against the wind with inhuman strength and balance. Even with Wakaiketsu powered down and fluttering against the gales, they could still do *this*, and that was so cool it honestly gave them chills.

Mako, on the other hand, was less impressed. Especially after a car full of college-aged kids recklessly sped up to match them. They rolled down their windows so the guys could bellow "WOOOOO!" at the top of their lungs and the girls could wave and shout "WE LOVE YOU!". After they were gone Mako yelled back to him, "Mataro get down from there! You're gonna cause an accident!"

"Ah c'mon sis!" He protested, "You can't feel the wind in your hair down there! Hey, Ryuko, you should really try it too!"

"Ugh," Ryuko rolled her eyes with a smirk. Just when Mataro thought she wasn't going to do anything suddenly she sprang to her feet, quick as lightning, and as if she weighed nothing at all she lunged out of the car without rocking it even slightly. She twirled through the air behind Mataro, falling in to perfectly match the car's pace right next to him. As she flew, she gave him a smug mock-salute and then after a moment settled right back down in her spot.

"Pshh, showoff!" Mataro scoffed, feeling a little foolish.

"Geez Ryuko, I can tell you for sure nobody'd ever think you were gonna have a baby, moving like that!" Mako said, mostly as impressed as ever but also maybe, just *maybe* lightly chiding her.

"Good!" Was Ryuko's response, "Then I'll keep it up as long as I can!" But when she spied the metal water bottle Mako was sipping from she quickly changed her tune, "Hey Mako, can I get a hit a' that water? Pleeese? Just a little?"

Ira chuckled, "And nevermind, there it is."

"Okay, but you gotta remember your own next time, alright?" Mako said as she passed it over. Of course, there was no way Mako would really deny her the water she so desperately needed, and Ryuko knew it was a hollow threat.

"So," Ira asked Mako, "you want to stay the night at Ryuko's?"

After a moment of consideration Mako responded, "Ehh, nahh. I'm wiped out, yo! And besides, you'd have to go get the dogs!"

"Oh, that's no problem, the highway's usually not too busy after rush hour," When that still didn't get her to cave, he asked, "Really no? Not just no to be nice?"

Mako sighed and said (more softly, as though this could offend Ryuko), "To be honest, I just wanna have a nice big dinner and zone out in front a' the tv. Plus, my back is starting to cramp

up reaaal bad.”

Ira winced, “Ooh, message recieved. Well, it’s probably for the best anyway,” He said, making a *\*tch\** noise with his mouth as he pointed up to the sky. A billowing thunderhead was sweeping towards them. “Looks like I’m going to have to put the top up soon.”

Appraising the sky, Ryuko morosely said, “Ugh, that’s not gonna go away for days, they say. It’s crazy too how they said that the monsoons would be coming earlier - cuz, y’know, climate change – and it happened exactly like that. Sure hope it isn’t gonna be like this all damn summer.”

“What? No way, but we gotta be able to go to the beach when you guys win!” Mako exclaimed. That wasn’t all, of course. She strongly (and correctly) suspected that Ira was trying to work up the courage to propose and was holding out that it might come in time for a beach wedding. Well, probably not since he was the type to wait until the war was over, just to make sure they could take a real honeymoon without any combat-related interruptions. But Mako could dream, couldn’t she?

Ira nodded in agreement, “But sadly, there isn’t anything even we can do about that.”

~~~~~

The rains did come, great, sheeting peals of it that made it hard to see even the short distance from the sliding doors of Ira and Mako’s den to the wooden fence of the backyard. Ira peered out into it and watched as the dogs bounded around outside, splashing through the sopping grass as though it was all one huge puddle. Actually, on closer inspection, it was.

“This might be the end for your basil plants,” He reported. The pots of spices Mako was growing along the edge of the patio were overfilling. The ones furthest out from the house, containing the basil, even had clumps of soil flowing over the brim on the water.

“Aww,” She whined, “Maybe I can still save them?”

“They were looking pretty weedy before, honestly,” Ira prepared to open the door as the dogs bounded over, expectantly staring right through the glass.

“Oh boy, here we go,” Mako said, rising from the couch. Extremely stiffly.

“Heyheyhey whoa. You underestimate how much faster than dogs a kamui is. Ready Tekketsu?”

*[Ready!]*

“Huh?” Mako asked, as before her eyes Ira flung open the door and in a blur of motion snagged the two towels they kept next to the door for just this situation and tossed them onto the german shepherd’s shaggy, soaked backs and tied the corners together, effectively stopping them from shaking free. They did shake their bodies in that instinctive way dogs do – they couldn’t help themselves – but they seemed perplexed and almost embarrassed when that didn’t spray water everywhere.

“Wow, you coulda just done that all along, huh?” Mako observed.



Ira shrugged as he began more thoroughly drying Buster, the more energetic of the two dogs who was less likely to wait his turn, “Well, you always seem to have fun with it.”

“Oh, I seem to? What about desperately struggling to keep those two big galoots from trashing the whole house seems fun to you?”

“But you do have fun with it.”

Mako caved with a laugh and said, “Yeah, alright I do.” Now dry but with the towel still over his head and back, Buster came over to see her and Mako pulled it down like a shawl and said, “Hah! Look, he’s a babushka!”

“A babushka?”

“Well, doesn’t he?” Mako turned the dog to face Ira, and it stared at him with a mostly blank expression, but in that little twinge of confusion on top of the blankness he couldn’t help but see how awkward the poor thing felt being subjected to this indignation.

Ira chuckled, “No, you’re not wrong. Just, why did you choose that, of all things?”

“Unno. Okay, here boy, let me get that off ya!” Mako leaned down to untie the towel, but as she did she winced and clutched at her lower back. “Gee-eez!”

“That bad, huh?” Ira said, now finished dealing with the dogs he came over to ease her back down to sitting. “You know it’s a puzzle. We stretched and everything – oh, wait a second. We forgot this one, didn’t we?” Ira sprang to, lifting his hands above his head and grabbing onto an elbow, then tilting his entire upper body left and right until his torso was at a roughly forty-five-degree angle.

“Oh! You’re right! We totally did!” She slapped a hand to her forehead. “Duh! Damn, how the hell are you so flexible at that I bet I couldn’t-,”

“No, please do not get up and try it!” Ira held up his hands to stop her from rising, “It will not help anymore.”

Mako pouted. After a day of being utterly trounced in the dojo, learning that despite his best-efforts Ira was so far beyond her ability that he struggled to even teach her, to see that he with his tree-trunk body was somehow more flexible than her too was just disheartening. *That* is what a kamui wearer was. And she knew in comparison she was totally, utterly ordinary.

“What’s wrong?” Ira asked plainly, sitting next to her.

“... Am I gonna be okay?” Mako eventually asked, then swiftly went on, “It’s just, you know, not much time left ‘til Ryuko wants to give me my kamui and I’m still all crippled after just a normal day of exercise!”

“Well, today wasn’t exactly a usual day,” Ira said, “We barely stopped for lunch.”

“Yeah, but like, look at Nonon. I mean I-I don’t even get it I didn’t even know little chicks like us could get abs like that it’s *crazy*! And like, that’s what you’ve got to do to wear a kamui, so am I *really* gonna be okay when I put mine on?”

“Whoa, hold up,” Ira held up a hand. “Let me explain a couple things. First off, when Nonon met Saiban he tried to kill her. *That’s* why she barely survived. That won’t happen to you. And second off the only one of us who got hurt when they put on their kamui the normal way was Shiro. He just had some very minor internal bleeding.”

“Oh, *very minor* internal bleeding! Lovely!” Mako said.

“And then he’s been fine ever since!” Ira countered, “And he is much, much less fit than you.”

“No way!”

“It’s true. He’s *terrible* at sticking to a workout routine, always has been. Gets knocked on his ass in a stiff breeze,” Ira chuckled. “Trust me, you’re doing *great* in comparison.”

“But still, the abs,” Mako said.

“Oh, well that? Well, not to say Nonon isn’t fit, she is, but that’s mostly just because of her low BMI. You can see the muscles better is all. No, I’m serious. Rei – when you compare them without kamui – runs a way faster mile *and* can lift more too.”

That was another surprise to Mako, “You’re kidding! And I always thought she was so crazy fit!”

“She’s an excellent gymnast, agility is her thing,” Ira explained. “Raw strength obviously not.”

Mako was on a roll now, “So what other gym secrets about everyone else have you got? Oh! What’s Satsuki’s like?”

“Satsuki. Well let’s just say *she* is a cut above what’s reasonable. She fits it in, over the course of the day, you see, so she probably doesn’t go an hour without doing pushups or curls at least. Keeps her metabolism up all day, then couple that with morning and evening runs. Very methodical, very Satsuki.”

“So *that’s* how she does it!”

“Makes sense now, eh? Ryuko, on the other hand, well to be honest I think her hybrid body just keeps her operating at peak condition no matter what. She could never get the same amount of tone Satsuki has though, because to really work out her muscles she’d have to bench press a continent. As for the rest of us, well you know Uzu’s story.”

“Sure, he’s your lifting buddy and he’s got the dojo. And then Aikuro and Tsumugu must be lifting buddies too, and obviously Houka and Shiro-,”

“No no, It’s Houka and Nonon.”

“Ohh. I get it now,” Mako giggled. “And I have youu for my lifting buddy too,” She said sweetly, gingerly scooching herself so that she was laying partially in Ira’s lap.

He smiled, “You do. But that’ll only get you so far though. You know what my secret is, right?”

“Hmm?”

“It's the music. With the right playlist you can really lose track of the time. That's what we've got to do, is get you some music that fires you up.”

“Iraaaa! Your music's way too intense you know that!” Mako whined.

“Well, that's why it works. But if that doesn't do it for you, why not ask Ryuko for some ideas?”

Mako scoffed, “She only listens to Nonon's music.”

“Oh, is that right?” Ira absorbed that tidbit with a raised eyebrow, “Nonon has dabbled in just about every genre so I don't think that really narrows anything down.”

“Yeah, and that doesn't help either. Can't ask Nonon, 'course, because she'd just throw the whole damn record shop at me,” Mako waved her arms around in exasperation.

“This is true... Well, I shall think on it. Now, you look hungry.”

“I'm *always* hungry.”

“Well, you *look* hungry. What do you want?” Ira asked.

Mako thought seriously about that, it was a big decision, “Hmm. Grilled cheese san'? Nice and simple-like.”

“Sure. I'm gonna throw in some ham and peppers on mine, upgrade it to a panini. You want?”

“Oh definitely,” Mako grinned, “And make sure the edges are burnt and crispy!”

“Ah, the ‘Ryuko Special’. Don't worry, I'm on it,” Ira said, but as he tried to shift Mako off his legs she winced again. “Still hurts, huh?”

She nodded, “Laying like this actually makes it *worse*.” With a great effort and a strained noise, she lifted herself off him, flopping over the other way on her belly and demanding into the cushions, “Gimme a massage!”

“A what?”

“A massage! Make it better, Iraaaaa!” She said, dragging out his name in her most insistent tone.

Ira sighed, “But I don't know how to do that. I'm not Rei.” And yet, he knelt down next to the couch anyway and positioned his hands over her lumbar, as though about to slam down with a karate chop.

“It's like my back muscles are crushing my spine, Ira please – ah!” She yelped as Ira did exactly that, dropping the side of his thick hand down onto her back, swiftly followed up by the other. “uh-uh-uh-he-he-he-ha-ha-ha-HA-HA-HA-I-IR-RA-KNOCK IT OFF!” She finally managed to cut through having the wind knocked out of her by Ira's rhythmic drumming.

He laughed and tried to sound innocent as he said, “What? This is a type of massage! Is it not working?”

“No of course it’s not working!” She playfully sprung up and whipped a pillow at his face. “Do it for real!”

“But see? You’re up and moving!” He protested, then said, “Oh, fine, here. Let me try for real.”

This time, he rolled up her shirt and kneaded gingerly with his thumbs and the tips of his fingers. Tekketsu helped too, she seemed to be better at detecting where there was tension because to Ira it was just, *wow, she’s so soft*. It never ceased to amaze him. *And frail. I can’t be surprised it’s a little scary to her*. His heart went out to her, but in all his logical explanation of how she could survive the strain he couldn’t find the way to just say “*It’s gonna be okay*”.

[*Have you ever really told her why you changed your mind?*] Tekkestu asked him. It was a good point – until recently he’d been opposed, on a gut instinct level, to her having a kamui. But then Ryuko had called him one evening. She asked him if Mako was in the room, told him she was pregnant, then quickly shifted to what Mako had to say about that, and Ira’s mental calculus came to a new conclusion. No, it was time to grow up. And when he realized that soon he’d be married to Mako, the idea of spending the rest of his life with someone who couldn’t share in half his world was just unthinkable. *She’s going to love it so much. But how could she not be frightened now, even if she’s also excited?*

“Ohhh....Ahhh....Ahn!” Mako snapped him out of his thoughts. She was making a series of oddly – purposefully – sensual moans. And another, “Ahhh-ah!”

Ira’s face immediately went quite bright red and he said, “Hey, knock it off!”

“What?” Mako said innocently.

“You know exact what. Don’t-don’t make noises like that!”

“But it’s working! You can’t tell me you’ve never had a massage when you were really, really sore! Can’t help what kind of sounds you make!”

Ira stayed on the defense, “Well for one thing *I* stretch. And I don’t really mind the pain.”

Mako looked at him with a mischievous grin and said, “Yeah I *know* you don’t – puehehehehe.”

That was too much. Now rather than continue the massage he put his fingers to the sides of her torso and tickled her. The response was immediate and violent. “Hey-hahahaha! Nohoho!”

“What? Isn’t this like a massage?”

She kicked and writhed in a vain effort to get away, almost bashing Ira on the forehead with a heel, until her twisting became so violent that with an audible *\*pop\** her back arched and she yelled “OW!” She flung her hands over her lower back and Ira held up his hands, unsure if he’d just made everything so much worse

But when she sat up, it was with a surprised feeling as she patted around. “Oh hey,” She giggled sheepishly, “Feels better.”

~~~~~

With Mako somehow cured of the cramp in her back, Ira went to make dinner. Even though Mako hadn’t asked for it, he was making salads on top of the panini sandwiches. As he cut up an apple to top them with, he set aside spare bits to throw to the dogs.

He smiled to himself, still in the glow of just messing around with Mako. *I’m so lucky*, he thought, *And I’d be a fool not to make sure every day can be like this.*

*[You know what you need to do,]* Tekketsu said gently, and she was right. He already had the ring, in the same case about the size of a pen box where he kept his no dachi in its shrunken form – he carried it wherever he went. But...

“When will it be the right time?” He wondered aloud.

*[We can’t stick to the original plan. After she gets her kamui it’s... it’s nice, it’d be special, but you saw how Mataro and Wakaiketsu were.]*

“Yeah, always wandering off somewhere on their own.” They’d even vanished from their own party, and Ryuko had found them off on the other side of the lake, sitting on the waterside patio of an empty mansion and skipping stones. “She’ll definitely be like that. So were we.”

*[We all were. That will be their time. Intruding on that is just no good,]* Tekketsu concluded, and when Ira nodded she asked, *[You’re relieved, aren’t you? To be putting it off.]*

“No. Definitely not,” Ira shook his head. “Well, okay, maybe a little. I keep saying I’ll know the right moment when I see it, but that’s not as easy as it seems.” Tekketsu was silent. He knew she had no ideas either.

“Ah screw it. I’ll just call Ryuko.”

~~~~~

~ “Hey man, what up?” ~

“Hello Ryuko, how’s your afternoon going?”

~ “ ‘S great man. Satsuki’s here too, by the way.” ~

~ “Hello Ira!” ~ Satsuki piped in merrily.

~ “And Rei.” ~

~ “Hi!” ~

“Oh uh, hello.”

~ “So, what’s up?” ~

“Nothing really. I just had a question for you.”

~ “Sure thing, ask away.” ~

“Oh uh,” Ira hesitated, “I was hoping not in front of Satsuki.”

~ “Yeah... okay no problem.” ~ He could hear her getting up, shuffling around. ~ “I’m just gonna... yeah, I’ll be right back... no, don’t pause it, it’s fine. I’ll figure it out!” ~ She said to someone who couldn’t be heard.

~ “Well if it’s that or you talking over it,” ~ Satsuki said.

~ “Yeah, you looked bored anyway,” ~ Rei added.

~ “Oh come on – I’m not! It’s just these arthouse movies, you’re supposed to be quiet, aren’t you? Okay... okay fine I’ll be right back!” A door closed, and then she said to Ira. ~ “So what’s up?” ~

Ira explained the situation to her, finally ending with, “I was going to ask how you decided when, but actually no, that’s not a good question. It was so obviously the right day you and Satsuki both picked it. But I don’t have anything like that so... I don’t know I just want it to be special.”

~ “Hey hey hey, it will be. Trust me, Mako doesn’t ask for a lot. It’s just kinda freaky isn’t it? On the one hand you want to focus on making sure everything’s perfect, on the other you can’t even believe it’s really happening, right?” ~

“Yeah... How did you get over that? I mean, you made it look easy, first with proposing and then now, with Nozomi. You impressed me, if I’m being honest?”

~ “Oh, hehe, that?” ~ There was nervous, almost morose tinge to Ryuko chuckle, ~ “Maaan, I’ve seen like, what the universe is really like. Just, the size of it, the **time**. Life’s short for you guys, so I decided I couldn’t waste another second of it,” ~ She sighed and said, ~ “That’s probably not very helpful to you, is it?” ~

“Um, not particularly? Do you think I should go for it right now, then?” That didn’t sound like a good idea to Ira.

~ “No, I don’t think so... hmm... what I think you need to do is surprise her. She already knows it’s coming, so the only thing you can do is wait for a moment where she forgets to be on the edge of her seat. Like, when she thinks things can’t get any better. Or maybe even if she’s down about something. That’s when you go for it.” ~

“Huh. I think I understand. The only way to make it truly special is to really surprise her. I’ll still need to wait for a moment, but-”

*[With that criteria, I think we stand a chance. Thank you, Mother.]*

“Tekketsu says thank you. And uh, thanks,” Ira said.”

~ “Aww. *No problem man, anytime. You’re right though, you gotta get it right. For her.*”

~

“Of course. Well, I’d better get back to cooking dinner.”

~ “*Yeah and I’d better get back to this movie,*” ~ Ryuko said, ~ “*Seeya tomorrow!*” ~

“Yup, another busy day.”

~ “*Yup. Oh, and please don’t forget to wear a damn condom!*” ~

~~~~~

“Oooh!” Mako gasped when Ira placed her plate on her lap in front of her. “Yummy! Thank you so much!”

“Think nothing of it,” Ira said, “Now, what’re we watching?” He sat down on the couch next to her.

“Iunno,” Mako shrugged, barely making a coherent noise because her mouth was full. “I just put on dashboard camera videos honestly.”

“Works for me,” Ira said. They crunched on lightly burned sandwiches and salad for a while in silence, watching the bizarre, random seeming videos of unfolding chaos on the TV. Eventually Ira asked, “Hey, did you think of a name yet?”

“Nah.”

“Really?” That was a surprise, “I thought, with how excited you are...”

“I think I gotta wait to see him. I’ll know what’s fitting then I think,” Mako said with a tone of certainty.

“I’m sure you will,” Ira concluded. That wasn’t a bad way to do it at all. He could trust her instincts with that. “Just don’t make it anything dumb.”

“I would *never!*” Mako gasped in the most obviously sarcastic voice maybe ever.

# Princess Mankanshoku

## Chapter Summary

Actually surprise! This is a situation where I decided to split a longer chapter up so I could give you all something. The end of the semester means idk exactly when I'll be able to get the next part done. But this section stands on it's own well enough I think.

UPDATE: Pretty close to done on the next chapter! Things are finally calming down in my life, at least for a while.

May 2068

~~~~~

Ira had hardly finished parking at the entrance to the Noyamakita Park before as if from nowhere a swarm of paparazzi descended, shouting and flashing their cameras. They couldn't get too close though, because there were secret service guards ready and waiting too. A wall of big-shouldered men with stony faces and black suits slid into place between the crowd and their muscle car. Mako stood up in her seat and stared over them with an uneasy look.

"Madam princess!"

"Princess Mankanshoku, what are your thoughts on-,"

"-Will you be joining the war effort, Princess?"

"With the Queen expecting, how is Madam Satsuki-,"

"Have you decided your kamui's name yet, Madam Princess?" They shouted over each other, everything from political issues Mako knew nothing about to banal gossip about her life.

"Gee-eez," She murmured to herself. "Didn't know it was gonna be such a big deal."

"I know," Ira said, "You weren't here for Yuda's so you didn't get to see but people figured out we were holding the ceremony in the park *real* quick. I mean, how could they ignore the giant column of light? Which is why we just picked a random day for you, if we couldn't keep the location secret we could at least keep the time secret. Satsuki's idea. Ironic though, because technically speaking giving a *him* a kamui, someone who wasn't at Honnouji, is a much bigger deal politically, and it's not like he didn't draw crowds but *this*..."

"Eh, we knew it'd be like this," Mako tried to be blithe about it, though in truth the sheer throngs of people come to see her were intimidating. There were ordinary people joining the crowd now too, a teeming mob of them blocking the parking lot entrance, cheering and chanting and raising banners. They must have staked the park out, and now that it was confirmed that *today* was the day, they were breaking out into an impromptu festival. "Satsuki's smart, but it didn't do a lot of good, huh?"



“Better than nothing, I think,” Ira leapt over the door to the car and Mako did the same. Since she’d started working out, getting her body to move like that was surprising easy. Used to be her startling bursts of athleticism were totally instinctive, but now she could summon it a will. And that was such a thrill she couldn’t help but try it out. Even if only Ryuko had ever commented on how she looked like she’d lost a ton of weight - so Mako had to conclude that she looked as soft and untrained as ever.

Mako heard a familiar voice from in the crowd, shouting, “Let me through, let me through already! I’ve got security clearance, see? Now will you just – let – me – hey! What’s your problem?” It was Haruka, shoving her diminutive body through despite jostling and dirty looks from the other journalists. She waved an ID card that proved her trusted status, and when the guards saw it, they wasted no time clearing a path for her to come through into the clear space around the car. Then she stood there, hands on her knees as she caught her breath.

“Haruka! Heyyy!” Mako’s face broke into a grin as she spotted the familiar face.

“Oh good, she made it through. You think you can take it from here?”

“Mhm!”

“Excellent. Because I have some setup to attend to. I’ll see you soon. And, uh, good luck, I think that’s appropriate. According to Mataro and Yuda the hike’s a real thinker.”

“Pssh, I’m sure I’ll find a way around that,” Mako said with a giggle. Ira chuckled and she sprang up to give him a quick kiss before in one smooth motion he leapt off into the overgrown woods, clearing the crowd without even needing to power Tekketsu up.

“You excited for that?” Haruka asked, and when Mako looked at her she shrugged she quickly added, “Nevermind, stupid question.” She produced a wireless microphone from her bag and clicked it on, then turned to the paparazzi – still busily snapping pictures – and said, “Okay, can you calm down?” When that did nothing but earn her some dirty looks from the front row – and who could blame them, as far as they were concerned, she was only up there alongside Mako thanks to personal clout – she shouted, “Calm down, please!”

Mako grabbed the mic and shouted, “HEEYYY!” And that brought silence in mere seconds.

She handed it back to Haruka, who cleared her throat and said, “Let’s all be respectful of the Princess’s time now! Big day for her. We all came here because the people want to know what’s going on in Princess Mankanshoku’s head, so we can all walk away happy, right?” There was some annoyed looking grumbling – this was a tense situation, potentially career making, and they’d all had to jockey for the right to be standing there at their various newspapers and magazines. But nobody moved, and so over the dull roar of the distant crowds Haruka asked, “So, how’re you feeling?”

Mako leaned into the microphone and said, “Oh, so excited! Like a kid on Christmas!” A canned response, but from her you could tell it was true too.

“And how’s everyone else acting about it?” Haruka continued.

“Eh, I’ve only seen my boyfriend, Mataro, and Ryuko and Satsuki so far today,” Mako answered, “Ira and Mataro were all serious, like they wanted to scare me about how serious today

was. And Ryuko and Satsuki were just, y’know, normal. You shoulda seen my parents though, they were all –,” She held her hands up to her eyes to open them wide and glassy, “They kept saying how proud they were of us, and Mataro got all stammering and stuff, he’s such a goof.” The gathered journalists recorded and wrote with great enthusiasm – nice, they were getting some juicy tidbits after all.

“So did Ryuko talk to you about it at all? Make sure you were ready?”

“Nahh, mostly that was my boyfriend’s job – I think they told him to – but he woulda done it anyway,” Mako waved a dismissive hand.

“So, what did you and Ryuko talk about?”

Mako looked at her innocently and said, “I dunno, what do you talk about with your friends?”

“Oh, well, um,” Haruka looked a little baffled, “I guess we talk about what we’re doing at the moment, joke around, maybe gossip a little... isn’t that what most people do?”

“Yeah, well there ya go!” Mako said brightly.

Haruka shrugged, “Alright then. So, what would you say you’re looking forward to most?”

“Oh, I just can’t wait to meet him!”

“That’s it?” Haruka said, leading her to elaborate as planned.

“Yeah, totally!” Mako nodded, totally assured, “You know, I bet I knew Senketsu better than anyone – ‘sides Ryuko of course – and then Ira’s had Tekketsu for like, a long time now, so I know what it’s like. Well, I always knew I wanted to see what it was *really* like, anyway.”

“But the combat abilities don’t hold any interest to you? You’ve fought once or twice, haven’t you?”

“Well – I mean – no I’m still gonna have fun with all that, who wouldn’t? You know how many times I’ve seen Ryuko jump over the tops of skyscrapers? Yeah, I’m so *totally* doing that. But fighting? Well maybe I’ll tussle with the guys, they do have a lot of fun with that, but no way I’m fighting for *real*,” Mako was aware that whether or not she would be joining the war effort was one of those questions on everyone’s lips, she’d seen it on the news, but she still didn’t quite know why. Were there a few pundits who were critical of so much money and time being poured into a pointless project when lives were on the line? Sure, but what Mako would never get was that most people couldn’t conceive of a kamui detached from the heroic warrior who wore them. Especially considering that Mako had been at *Honnouji*, so there was no way she was as meek as she appeared.

“Okay, Aaand what’s the first thing you’re going to do after you’ve gotten your kamui?” Haruka asked the next question on her list.

“Ah, that’s easy, I’m going to the Matoi’s and we’re gonna have a nice big party, same as for Mataro,” Mako said, then she giggled to herself and added, “It’s still funny to call ‘em that. *The Matois*. Wow.”

“Even more so for you, I’m sure,” Haruka nodded and went on quickly, “Now, last but not least: have you chosen a name for him?”

Mako was surprised by that question, and it showed, but to Haruka it looked reproachful too. Haruka backpedalled and said, “I’m sorry, is that not -,”

“Well, it would kinda ruin the reveal,” Mako protested, “And also like, no, I haven’t yet.”

“Wha-you-really?”

“Yeah really, how’m I gonna do something that important without even seeing him?”

“I didn’t think of it that way,” Haruka said, then she turned to the crowd and said, “Okay, any final words to the people watching out there?”

“Um, let’s see,” Mako looked thoughtful and crowd got quiet, waiting for her. It gave her the time to process just how many of them were out there, filling the road and even crowding on the balconies across the street. “Thanks to all of you for tuning in, that’s very sweet. Like Ryuko says, I love you all. I guess it’s just a bit crazy to have everyone making such a big deal over... me.”

On that note, the crowd broke out not into the chaotic shouting and chanting from before, but a respectful applause. When that went from deafening to just noisy, Haruka turned to the journalists and said, “See, was that so hard? More than you would’ve gotten by just shouting at her, right?”

The reaction from the other journalists was, to Haruka’s surprise, to continue the applause. She had a point, they had expected to be treated like pests to be swatted away as their celebrity quarry rushed past, so this was a nice change of pace. Some stayed to snap a few more photos, but a lot of the distant crowd began to disperse and mingle with everyone else who was celebrating behind them.

Haruka clicked off the mic and said, “Wow, that went pretty well. Thanks for agreeing to do this.”

“ ‘Course! Makes me think, I should probably tell Ryuko to do press conferences more often people like this stuff.”

“Are you surprised? You’re the most famous people on Earth, everyone wants to know about you,” Mako looked a little worried by that thought, frowning slightly with eyes tilted down into the asphalt, and so Haruka awkwardly said, “I mean, um... I won’t take up any more of your time. Congratulations though!”

The guards parted, opening the circle around them into a path towards the entrance to the park. Noyamakita had fallen into disrepair during Ragyo’s day and was never fully cleared, so the bushes that had reclaimed it were dense, the trees tall and disorderly.

But before Mako could start on her way, suddenly the guards snapped to attention. They all turned towards the crowd, the ones nearest the street suddenly had needle pistols in their hands. Mako and Haruka froze. But all that happened was there was a couple muffled reports of needle guns from somewhere in the crowd, a few shouts that sounded more confused or dismayed than jubilant, and then one of the guards Mako recognized listened to his earpiece and solemnly nodded to her.

“W-what just happened?”

Mako explained, “There was someone with a bomb out there.”

“Holy shit.”

“It’s alright. They already took care of it. I’ve seen this happen before, REVOCS has been trying to get me for a while now so they’ve figured out how to keep me safe.”

Haruka said urgently, “Well, are you going to be alright in the forest I mean what the fuck! There could be guys in there!”

But Mako smiled and said, “It’ll be alright. I’m wearing Ryuko’s bracelet anyway, it couldn’t hurt me. It’s everyone else they’ve got to worry about. And besides, Ryuko and Nonon both have super-powerful, like, senses and stuff. If anything was *really* wrong, they’d have already handled it.”

“Wow. I thought I knew what you guys’s lives were like. But that, man I had no idea,” Haruka said with a shocked chuckle. “I mean, that’s gonna be over today, right?”

“Dunno, hope so. But at least it won’t be able to scare me anymore.”

~~~~~

An overgrown forest could feel like a gloomy place. Especially on a hazy, overcast day, and especially with the concrete faces of the skyscrapers on every side. Now Mako knew what Mataro had meant about the oppressive feeling this hike had.

Her eyes kept drifting up to those towers on the skyline. They weren’t pretty buildings, more of tenements actually, and Mako could vividly imagine the dull, dingy lives of the people inside. Until recently, that had been her life. Her father had taught her the way to walk to deter muggers – downtrodden but not unconfident, like you had problems of your own that losing what little cash you had would make no worse. Her mother had taught her how to scrimp and save on the food bill - how long after the expiration date different clearance items were “still good”, what spices to revive the taste of even bottom-shelf brands. She was fully aware what it was like to live your life knowing that all you had to look forward to was a dead-end job making or selling junk that nobody really needed.

And she didn’t have the words for it, but she could feel the inherent unfairness that she should be down here, less than half a mile from becoming something more than human – powerful and whole in a way that sounded like something from a dream. While they trudged through their bleak concrete halls, sat on rotting, moth-eaten sofa, and watched her on decades-outdated TVs all while thinking to themselves that it was absolutely good and proper that the world be handed to her on a silver platter.

Living like they did, there was only one real answer – friends and family were what mattered. Good food and good company, Mako had always known that. But *she* knew, and even if she couldn’t quite articulate it, she keenly sensed that other people wanted more. That they didn’t know that simple truth or that even if they did, their families were wretched and broken and couldn’t be what they needed. So they looked at her, at Ryuko...

*They want to know what it’s like to be me. They want to **be** me!* Once, Mako might have thought that she was someone too ordinary to deserve such an honor, that only the powerful and wicked could be admired that way. But then along came Ryuko, who was just as ordinary as her, but look

at all the magic hidden right there inside her! And then she got to know Satsuki better, and plain as day Satsuki was a good, decent person just like all the ordinary proles like her. So it wasn't that but, *How can anyone deserve it? How can so few of us get everything in the world handed to us?*

Class politics was one of those things that Mako concluded was too stuffy and abstract to comprehend, but she kept thinking of something Satsuki said in a speech at Ryuko's coronation. Society was like a pyramid, people moving up and down in the innards of a huge, unfeeling, mysterious monolith (at least, that was the mental image Mako got from that metaphor). And Ryuko was above even that, as high as anyone could go. What hidden machinery was it that determined who rose and fell? Mako didn't know, but she knew she didn't like the idea that she too was trapped in that vast, huge system.

So she stopped, leaned up against a tree with a comfortable cushion of moss around it, and sat down. Taking even one more step was impossible with this feeling creeping over her. Mulling it over, Mako still couldn't put a name to what she felt was so out of place. And that meant she couldn't get over it. All there was to do was look blankly out over her tucked-up knees and hum to herself.

Until a distinct rustling from the trees above startled her. She barely had time to jerk her head up when suddenly bright red-orange light broke through and Ryuko dropped down. She plopped down right in front of Mako and as the glow in her hair died down to normal levels Mako could see her warm smile.

"Hey bestie," Ryuko said, "Having a little trouble?"

Mako gasped, "Ryuko!" She flung herself at Ryuko and hugged her. "You scared me!"

"Oh! Sorry, duh, shoulda expected that. Now, what's up? Talk to me," Ryuko ruffled her hair as they parted.

"Oh, I dunno... I just started feeling like, really pent up inside, you know?" Mako started. "It's like what it felt like going to Honnouji on the day of the festival."

"Really? 'Cause you seemed pretty chill back then I gotta tell you," Ryuko said, turning to sit next to Mako with her back to the tree.

" 'S only because I was with you," Mako said. "It's scary but it's not oh-my-god-I'm-gonna-die scary. It's a really *big* feeling. You know, the life-fiber kind of scary."

"Oh," Ryuko frowned, "So we ain't just talking about a bigger version of the issues you were having when you became princess, right?"

"Well yeah, there's that too."

"Yeah, that too," Ryuko nodded.

"Ryuko," Mako turned to her and said, "I'm not a very smart person."

"Hey, hey, what does Satsuki always say about that kind of talk, huh? That there's a difference between smarts and education? And you're smarter than you think, and actually more educated too."

“No, no I mean I’m not stupid but I’m not *that* smart either. So I dunno what I don’t like about all this. But I just think that a smart person would have a problem with what we’re doing here today.”

“Hmm,” Ryuko said, genuinely troubled. Vague though it was it was Mako’s intuition, and immediately her mind jumped to that feeling she got when people bowed down in front of her. Called her a god. “I... feel like I know what you mean. There’s this kind of feeling when you know that in your place anyone else would be able to do exactly what you do, but ‘nstead because you have all this power they treat you... you know how they treat you.”

Mako nodded “Yeah, like I just think it’s weird that when people look at me, getting a kamui, they just go, ‘well, this is great!’ When really what they should think is like, ‘hey, why is she getting that she’s just Ryuko’s friend, why can’t I have all those superpowers I want that!’ I mean, that’s what you mean right?”

“Yeah no, totally, I feel that so hard. When Shiro says he wants everyone to be a hybrid like me it’s a bit of a scare ‘cuz let’s be real, one hybrid who decided they were done with Earth could destroy everything and I don’t know if even I could stop them. I hope I can, because maybe he’ll get his way. But also, even despite that...” Ryuko sighed, “I kinda like the idea. I dunno though, maybe that’s a little to strong a thing to say. But it’s the exact kind of thing you’re talking about. When I think about how it’s just this tiny group of our friends who get all the power in the world, and yet everyone calls us heroes for that, it feels like something is wrong. But it’s so big that nothing I say really makes a difference. I went on TV and tried to get them to stop, nothing changed. So yeah, it’d be nice if I weren’t so one-of-a-kind anymore.”

“So *that’s* why you agreed to let Shiro make her like you,” Mako pointed to Ryuko’s) middle.

“Nahh – or, maybe just a tiny bit – but mostly it was ‘cuz Sats made a good point. That it wasn’t sinking in for me then that having a kid was real, but when it did if I *let* her be mortal, let her have a hard life, I’d regret it forever. What kind of parent would do that?”

“Mmm, yeah that’s what I think too,” Mako nodded. “Has it started to sink in yet though?”

Ryuko let out a cynical chuckle, “Yeah I fuckin’ think so. But later, I ain’t gonna make this about me.”

“No, c’mon,” Mako insisted sweetly. Ryuko had to comply.

She sighed, “I feel like at this point it has to’ve because look.” She lifted up the top of her royal ensemble and tucked it up enough to show her lower abdomen.

Mako did not look impressed. “Ryuko you look the same,” She said simply.

“What! No way! It’s subtle sure but I totally see the, y’know, difference, and so does Sats.”

Mako shrugged, “Yeah well it’s your body. And Sats sees you naked every morning. Or she’s just humoring you.”

“Sats does *not* humor me!” Ryuko protested, but Mako hit her with a piercing, skeptical work, “Okay, fine maybe she does, but not about this. A-anyway, back to what we were saying.”

Mako quickly returned to the original topic “Well, anyway. I also think I know whatcha mean. What gets *me* is how everything we do has to fit into a story or somethin’. Doesn’t it feel

like everyone seems to think today is symbolic of something? Like, I'm about to get the answer to life itself. So, what's it supposed to be a symbol of because I sure don't know!"

*Well, in a way you kinda are getting the answer to life. Only it's not a deep cosmic truth it's just companionship, the kind you didn't know you were missing,* Ryuko thought. She said, "You know, Nonon said something like that to me once. When the whole queen idea first came up. And I've heard too that after Sats and I got married there's been a lot more young people getting married. We're trendsetters. And lots of people have gotten way into martial arts since we started posting kamui sparring online. That one's a pretty good trend, I think, though."

"Yeah, and did you know that they're calling lil' Nozomi, 'The Miracle Baby'?" Ryuko's eyebrows perked up in alarm and Mako explained, "On account of she doesn't technically have a dad or anything."

"Oh-h my god she's gonna spend her whole life with them think she's Jesus," Ryuko said, quickly and under her breath. "Why didn't I think of that? Now you see that's exactly what we're talking about." She sighed, "Honestly, I don't know what to tell ya. I came down to help you get over your nerves and stuff, but this is a problem I have too. Like I've said before, at this point I just feel like nothing I do can change everyone on Earth's minds, so I just roll with it, try to make it work for me."

"I mean, I guess... I don't like it though."

Ryuko said, "Me neither... man I think I've got to talk to Satsuki about this. I just – damn I *cannot* let my girl grow up with everyone treating her like some goddess. I guess I kind of stopped worrying about though it because really there's bigger fish to fry."

"You mean REVOCS?"

"Well sure, but more than that, Senketsu and I have to make sure we're ready if the life-fibers ever come back. We're the only ones who can because we're the only ones I know for sure will live long enough," Ryuko explained, looking up at the trees with a philosophical expression.

"Right, so that's why you go absorb more life-fibers every day."

"I need to be as strong as I can be. But also, I just kinda want to see how far I can go. Make my comeback a real firework show. And I guess I've been kinda bored lately too, y'know," Ryuko said with a little giggle.

"Girl, you need a hobby. I thought you said you were reading more."

"Reading's boring."

Mako laughed, "Oho, now it makes sense."

"Yeah. I've been getting back into my design and my art, but you can't just do one thing all day."

"Oh!" Mako exclaimed, "You know what Ira and I have been doing lately? Going through and revising my playlists and finding new music and stuff!"

"Sounds fun. Doesn't he mostly listen to power metal though?" Ryuko asked.

“Well *yeah*, doesn’t mean that’s all he listens to. We got these splitters, see?” Mako fished around in the bag she’d brought with her (the jogging shorts she was wearing didn’t have pockets) and produced a paired set of headphones for two people to listen to music from the same phone. “Here, check out this, I’ve got one you’ll like.”

And so they plugged in the headphones and listened to music for a little bit. Mako was right, Ryuko did have a soft spot for acoustic indie rock – this song in particular was in classic latin style and had a mysterious and soulful feel to it and a fairly swift, driving tempo. Before long Ryuko was nodding along to it, pressed up against Mako’s shoulder and soaking in the sensations of the forest. They almost forgot about what they were there for, just for a brief moment.

“You know Nonon’s really good on the guitar,” Ryuko said during the transition between songs.

“That’s not like, an impressive piece of trivia Ryuko,” Mako giggled.

“No, maybe not. But she can make it sound this way, sort of ‘airy’, I don’t know the exact word. No idea how she does it but god damn it’s great.”

Unfortunately, that quiet moment could only last a couple songs before an angry text from Nonon and a much milder one from Satsuki reminded them they couldn’t just sit there and forget their problems.

“Ah, fine, fine, guess we really do have to do this, huh?” Mako said, dusting herself off as she stood.

“Ohh yeah. Whatever you think about being treated like a god, it’s too late now. He might still be asleep, but your kamui is very much alive. You’ve got to bring him into the world now, no other choice.” Mako’s eyes went wide as that sunk in. “Yeah. Now you see what it feels like.”



# Light the Sky Up

## Chapter Summary

I'm back! Semester over means time for my triumphant return, with an extra long "Kamui get" chapter for Mako! Hope you enjoy and don't forget to let me know any comments you have!

Discord:EnhLut\_spare#5463

May 2068

~~~~~

~[Yup, they're still out there]~ Misaki's synthetic voice piped from a tiny speaker on Houka's shoulder. The two of them stared out into the forest toward where Ryuko and Mako were sitting, though there was nothing to see but a thick screen of trees and brush. Still, Misaki didn't need to see – not directly – and she related everything to the Kamui Corps, Satsuki, and Mako's parents who were all waiting in the pavilion. ~[Bodycam on a security guard has them just, y'know, sitting there, as they do. Too far away to hear though. We shoulda just sent you and Ira,]~ She said to Tekketsu. ~[You'd have done a much better job keeping her own track. Who knows what they're yammering on about now.]~

Tekketsu sounded amused but she said, *[That is where you're mistaken, I'm afraid. There are some things Mako just needs to hear from Ryuko before she'll ever believe them.]*

"It's true," Ira nodded, "Like when we were buying the house, she was sure there was something wrong with it. Well, she wasn't gonna believe *me* when I said the realtors weren't ripping us off. I never had to deal with shifty Honnou-town landlords which apparently makes me naïve."

"Hah! Her calling you naïve, that's cute" Aikuro chuckled.

"Hey, Mako is street smart, you know!" Mataro said defensively.

"It's true, actually, she's alright," Uzu nodded. Given his upbringing as a gang leader for other vagrant kids, his street cred was authoritative, "I've seen her navigate the Tokyo metro like a pro a few times. Meaning I can see how she might think that. Uh, no offense to you, obviously."

Ira smiled and scoffed, "No, why would I be offended? I have a moderate amount of familial wealth, it's not like I'm a multi-trillionaire or anything. Uh, no offense meant, Satsuki?"

"Huh? Oh, none taken," Satsuki, said absentmindedly. Ira was a bit surprised; she'd been milling around with the rest of them, so he expected her to come back with a witty, retort, but she wasn't really paying any attention.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Nonon asked her.

“Not much, I was merely wondering if Mako will have that kind of trusting relationship with *him*,” She nodded in the direction of the top platform, where Mako’s kamui awaited her. “Or perhaps it will be the other way around.”

Everyone turned to regard the kamui with the sort of respect that felt appropriate. Mako’s kamui – as yet unnamed – was held upright by a simple stand and took the form of a short sundress and matching waist-jacket. A simple overall design was exactly what Ryuko had in mind for Mako, something elegant but without the flash and overwrought adornment typical to some of the others.

The dress had a tight waist and bodice and split skirts. It was woven with a delicate, lacy pattern of criss-crossing yellow-green and pale amber with bolder blue lines weaving through in a vein-like web. On such a silky, iridescent material all the crossing colors shimmered as the breeze caught the hems like a field of wild grass in the sun. The eyes, as was typical for women’s kamuis, were placed across the breasts right below a pair of thin shoulder straps.

From a distance, the jacket of Mako’s Kamui might have looked like it was made of very faded denim. It was a pale blue with a sort of dyed yellow-green gradient running down it. and looked fairly thick and tough in contrast to the wispy lace of the dress. However, on closer inspection the material was the same unerringly smooth and synthetic fabric as every other kamui – a material soft as fabric, sleek as silk, and endlessly pliant. The green of the lower part of the jacket matched to that of the dress and blended up into blue on the shoulders to create the impressionistic idea of a complete picture. Like a blue sky above that grassy field.

*~[It’s a good question,]~* Misaki said after a moment of contemplating her new sibling, *~[I suppose it all comes down to how true the adage really is. That we are our human’s mirrors, or opposite to them? Because if that is the case, then I doubt he will need Mako to teach him about our world, he’ll use the knowledge she has better than she herself does. So yes, I think it’s possible for something like that to happen.]~*

*[Only, that isn’t really true, is it? We aren’t opposite to our humans,]* Tekketsu said.

Misaki, realizing that she said something that could have been construed as a bit mean – implying that all the other kamui around her were little more than reflections of their wearers – immediately backpedaled a bit, *~[Well, I mean, I maybe overstated the case a bit there when I said like, exact opposites.]*

Satsuki looked over in curiosity, but she was only capable of hearing Misaki’s side of the conversation. Ira turned to her and said, “Oh, Tekketsu just said-,”

“-No, don’t mind me,” Satsuki cut him off with a courteous wave, “I’m sure they have much more skin in this conversation than I. Don’t ruin the flow just for me.”

*~[Or, you know, you could just use these handy mics that my boy here and Shiro made,]~* Misaki said.

*~[Yeah, honestly I don’t get it!]*~ Wakaiketsu chimed in. She’d insisted on getting one of the “Kamui-microphones” the very day after she awoke. Mataro had tried to give Houka the very best description of her voice he could but no matter how much he calibrated it she still mostly sounded exactly like Mako – not quite right. *~[I guess it’s alright for you guys, but you really think I’d let this moron speak for me?]*~

That got a chuckle out of everyone standing around, and their kamui didn't exactly need to laugh to express amusement in their auras.

*[Well it's just too hard!]* Reiketsu chimed in to complain, and that was met with general agreement from the other kamui *[You have to spend so long practicing it, I don't know how you did it so fast!]*

*[How's it work anyway,]* Saiban asked, *[Because when I was fighting Rosuketsu I used my speakers to play my voice out loud, so is it just like that or....]*

*[No, not all it's way more convoluted and roundabout. It has a tiny cup that clasps to your fabric and you have to make vibrations into it. That's not that much different from transforming just on a smaller scale. And then there is a computer that takes those vibrations and converts them into words, no idea how it figures out tone that's all Houka doing computer magic. And then the speaker plays it,]* Reiketsu might not have been a supercomputer but she still was Tsumugu's kamui and had the scientific mind to match, so she broke it all down very clearly.

*[Hah! Not that different from transforming my ass! I'll stick with doing it my way, thank you,]* Saiban said.

*[That aside, it is very Mataro of you though, isn't it? To insist on speaking for yourself,]* Tekketsu pointed out.

*~[Well yeah, never said it wasn't,]~* Wakaiketsu said, and Mataro crossed his arms in agreement.

*[And it was very Ira of you, to be so blunt with Misaki just there,]* Furashada added from his perch on Rei's shoulders.

*[Blunt? No, not at all. Ira's blunt, I'm concise. There is a sizeable difference,]* Tekketsu replied, sounding as haughty and sophisticated as she could. *[And I would not say bluntness and concision are opposites of each other, would you?]*

*~[Yeah, yeah point taken]~* Misaki relented. *~[I think we can relegate that 'opposites' thing to just one of those things the people wrongly decided about us from something Ryuko once said.]~* That got a sense of general agreement from the other kamui. "The people" - the billions of humans who had never worn their own kamui - were a single vague entity to them and very mysterious at that.

*[We should be so lucky that the people come that close,]* A new voice chimed in, soft and precise. It was Rama, Yuda's kamui – named after the woman who legend had it developed the Indonesian martial art of Silat. Powered down, she took the form of the lightweight armor of Pacific mariners; banded metal plates over a thin deep-blue and gold jacket with several scarves around his neck and a matching one serving as a belt. *[You know where Yuda is from they believe – but, nevermind that.]*

The other kamui liked to think they had gotten a good read on Rama in the few weeks since she had awoken, just as their wearers had a good read on Yuda. He might have been a royal bodyguard to the now extinct royal house of Indonesia, but it was clear from his easy interaction with common soldiers and languid disinterest in high society where he thought he really belonged. That was probably why he got along with the Kamui Corps so easily. But Rama, well, she was what he appeared to be – fully aware that her very existence was a rare privilege and a bit of a risk on the

part of her creator. So she was the dutiful palace bodyguard. Diligent, polite enough to scold Yuda when he slouched in front of diplomats, and above all determined to watch and learn.

Somehow that was the perfect combination to rub Wakaiketsu exactly the wrong way.

*~[No, what?]~* Wakaiketsu said acerbically. *~[I mean you so clearly want to say it, you might as well just spit it out then.]~*

And of course, that hit Rama's nerve and she gasped and said, *[Why, I don't see why I should, it's hardly relevant. If you're really that curious about it why don't you just ask Mataro, he was **there** after all!]*

*[Hey!]*

"Hey!" Saiban and Mataro both exclaimed at about the same time. Chastised both by Mataro and her commander, Wakaiketsu declined to fire back. She muttered barely audibly about pretentiousness to Mataro – half apology half continued tirade – and he shrugged and comfortingly said, "Yeah, yeah, I know."

*[But that aside, I think what matters most is what you want him to be like,]* Furashada said to Tekketsu.

*[What, me?]*

*[Yeah you. You'll be pretty close to him after all, to put it mildly.]*

The question seemed to catch Tekketsu off guard. She practically blushed. It wasn't lost on her that Mako – practically her wearers fiancé – getting a kamui meant that she was in practice gaining more than just another member of their tribe, but a partner. And looking at the way Saiban pretended her was so experienced and worldly and doted over Seijitsu's general obliviousness, or the way Izanami and Misaki were always chattering and sending secrets it was obvious that even if they didn't have *romantic* relationships, they were still very intimate ones. And what if it was a romantic relationship? What would that be like?

After a moment to compose herself she said, *[Honestly, I'm not really sure. If he's anything like Mako I'm sure we'll get along quite well. But... if there were something... well perhaps I would like it if he were a bit braver than her. Or more frequently brave, she has her moments. Because she might not use his powers on her own but well, you can just feel it in his aura. With Mako's life-fiber compatible blood in him he will be quite powerful.]*

Seijitsu laughed and said, *[Oh, and you like that, wouldn't you? A strong, brave gentleman, that's your type? I honestly would've pinned your type for more of a soft, scholarly guy.]*

*[What? No, no I never said that!]* Tekketsu responded bashfully, to the other kamui's amusement.

*~[Now see, this is a very Ira thing that's happening just now,]~* Misaki observed.

Meanwhile, distant from the inaudible conversation between kamui, Satsuki said. "I wonder, do you suppose there are things Ryuko only believes because she hears them from me? Things that have some political importance?"

Nonon, standing next to her, wasn't sure if she was wondering that to herself or expecting a response. Still, it got her attention, and she pulled a face and said, "Uh, are you really asking that? She thinks you're a genius whatever you say."

From the other side Rei added, "She believes you even when she knows you're joking, what do you think?"

"I have my own opinions on the matter. I just wanted to see what others might think," Satsuki replied. "Thank you both."

"Pssh, you just think you're so very witty don't you? With that smug look on your face?" Nonon retorted. "Alright, I've had about enough of this, I'm gonna text Ryuko and round 'em up!"

"A good idea. I suppose I should as well. Yours will get her attention, mine will give her the nudge."

~~~~~

The general atmosphere for Mako's kamui ceremony was meant to be casual, more so than the like the solemn experiences the others had. However, almost the moment that she and Ryuko touched down (Ryuko had flown them in over the trees) her expression totally shifted.

"Hey guys! Sorry we're la...te..." She trailed off as a sudden feeling hit her. Her went mouth slightly slack and eyes wide. It was like a stillness fell over the air and everyone else took a few steps back went quiet too. It was a silent signal that this was one of those moments when the magic happened, and they were all well aware of how to act in those moments.

Ryuko figured out just a moment before it clicked for the rest of the group what had happened. *Goddamn, when Shiro said that the Mankanshoku life-fiber compatibility was working overtime in her, this isn't what I had in mind. It's like he can detect that she's there... he's calling out for her.*

It was Mako herself who broke the silence, looking up at her kamui with a quiet, "Whoa". Then she declared, "Tonbo. That's his name."

"Tonbo? Dragonfly?" Ryuko asked, caught off guard by such an innocuous name. She wasn't alone, a murmur of surprise passed through them.

Mako looked back at Ryuko with a smile – still a slightly unsteady one – and said, "Definitely. His patterns, they remind me of the wings of a dragonfly. Makes me think of summer."

"Well then I guess I was wrong to doubt your 'name him when you see him' idea. Not what I expected but dammit, it works," Indeed, Ryuko had been thinking about something summery – natural, warm, freeing – when she designed Mako's kamui. How Mako made her feel. Even now they were on the same wavelength somehow.

"Yeah. It's perfect."

Now that the tension had been broken, Mako knew what to do. She hurried over and hugged her parents – how surreal was this for them, not one but both of their children becoming superhuman – and then swiftly undressed. She hardly needed that extra training Mataro and Yuda

and really all the rest of them had received to feel comfortable naked. There was no doubt she would synchronize with her kamui. So long as she really felt ready to awaken him.

Ira clapped a hand on her shoulder, massaging it as he said, “How you feeling? Ready?”

She nodded and leaned into his reassuring grip, saying, “It’s just... different seeing him in person. This is really happening. I could never imagine what it must be like, to transform and synchronize and all that. And now I’m going to do it.”

“Yup. That’s how it goes. But I can tell you’ve got nothing to be worried about.”

As Mako approached Tonbo, Shiro cleared his throat and said, “Now, before you awaken him, we did go ahead and make you a weapon. Naturally you’re under no obligation to use it, but you should have it anyway. Satsuki, would you do the hon.ors?”

Mako’s weapon was in a durable looking hardcase, a little longer than arm’s length and cylindrical. Satsuki hoisted it up by the shoulder strap and removed the cap, swiftly produced a weapon in the form of a baseball bat. Its perfectly smooth surface glinted in that glossy way that the blue-black sheen of hardened life-fibers always did. Around the handle there was a wrap of life-fibers made to look like Satsuki explained, “It’s yours. It’s not bladed so against other kamui and ultima uniforms if it ever comes to it, you’ll have to batter them quite a bit for a lethal blow, but we thought you’d be more comfortable with that anyway. And the wrap is life-fiber – Ryuko’s, actually – so they should be great for shock absorption, so the vibrations don’t rattle all the way down your arms. So what do you think?”

“Ohh, it’s *beautiful*! Not as beautiful as you Tonbo, but -,” She looked sweetly over to Ira and Mataro and said, “You guys are so thoughtful.” She reached out to take the handle from Satsuki, but the moment Satsuki let go of it the full weight hit her. Satsuki was wearing life-fibers, part of Ryuko, so her strength was magnified. But in Mako’s hands the tip slammed into the ground and she shouted, “Whoa! Well gee, thanks a lot, I can’t even lift the thing! It’s totally solid, must be like a hundred pounds!”

“Maybe you can’t lift it now, but soon enough...” Satsuki smiled, “It’ll be like a toothpick. A toothpick you can move mountains with.”

And now there really was nothing else to do but get on with it. Mako gulped and climbed the stairs. No, that uneasy feeling she had wasn’t going away, but here and now? It did fade a bit compared to the sheer anticipation of it.

Before she pricked herself and let the blood flow between them, Mako reached out and ran her hand along Tonbo’s skirts. But the moment she did, that weird feeling she got, that electricity in the air, it ramped up and shocked the wind out of her.

The air pressure dropped.

Everyone stood at attention. *This* was power. It felt like those rare times when Ryuko got *really* serious.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” She murmured. She sucked her breath in and winced as the needle slid into the soft skin of her finger. She had no real idea how these things usually went, usually felt. So she didn’t know that Ryuko was absolutely right and this gust of raw energy was noticeably stronger than normal.

But when the blood hit the fabric and sunk it Mako didn't have time to appreciate that.

It thundered over her. First the feeling of new senses unlocking to her, auras and power in every minor fluctuation through the air. Then a foreign presence invading her mind, rifling through memories, acquiring them as though they were its own. And finally, his eyes fluttering open, a deep whirlpool swirl of golden-orange light, just like Wakaiketsu only softer, somehow. She saw herself reflected in those eyes, both in the way she *knew* this being like they were one and the same and in how he saw right back through her too. Even if they had tried to explain, tried to break down every step it wouldn't have helped, it all happened in the space of one breathless gasp.

*[Hello, Mako]*

She clasped a hand over her mouth, almost feeling like she had been the one to say that. Either way the shock had taken over and there was nothing in the world but Mako and him. "You know my name!" She exclaimed.

*[Y-yes, I do,] Tonbo's voice had the sort of expressive swing to it that distantly sounded like her father's voice, but without the brazen nonchalance that made him seem equally crude and affable. It really was a distant comparison too because there was intelligence and precision to the way he surveyed the scene and said, [I apologize, maybe that was a bit too forward. I'm sure this situation is as foreign to you as it is to me but... well I must tell you everything, I think. You see Mako, I have no recollection at all until a few moments ago. Until I felt you drawing near. It was like a light cutting through the darkness, and I'm... very glad it was not just a passing moment. You must tell me again if I am being too forward, I did not mean to trawl your memories without permission but – you and I, were are made for each other, aren't we? That is this feeling I am experiencing right now.]*

Mako wanted to laugh to herself, *So this is what it's like! He's so confused, but he thinks I'm just as confused too! Only with Ryuko and Senketsu could they have both been equally confused what was going on.* But working through that, what this all must have felt like from his perspective, she suddenly realized just how weird the situation was. *I have to make sure he gets it.* She smiled sweetly, standing slightly taller than his eye level and ran a hand along the bodice just under his eye. "Silly, I came here for you," She said tenderly, "Go on, look through my memories. You'll see."

*[You - really?]* And he wasted no time jumping on that offer. Remembering things is not necessarily distracting – everyone does it all the time – but to jump willy-nilly in a mixed-up slideshow through one's life is still a bit of a shock. Especially when it wasn't you who was in control. Mako lifted her fingers to the side of her head, and Tonbo quickly said, *[I'm sorry! I'm sorry, but I think I got enough. I am rather foolish, aren't I? With but a moment more observation the situation becomes much clearer,]* No, he didn't sound quite like any Mankanshoku Mako had ever met, not when his instinct was to speak in such a sophisticated way. *[But I recognize them all now. Ryuko, and Satsuki, and Nonon and Saiban, Uzu and Seijitsu, and Ira... he's your, uh, what would the proper term be?]*

"My boyfriend?"

*[And you live together... so that means his kamui, Tekketsu and I...]* In the moment his eyes picked Ira out the gaze from Tekketsu seemed so piercing, so challenging. But then almost at the same time he did she averted her gaze and – well no, maybe that wasn't it. Maybe she too was

still struggling with the idea of living so intimately with another kamui and maybe she was hanging on his every word, anxious to see what he thought of the idea.

He had no idea how he felt about the idea. How could he know what he felt about anything with all these stimuli bombarding him? The birds calling, the wind ruffling his hems, the overpowering auras of the kamui and Ryuko and the dimmer ones of the humans and all the life humming in the forest. All he knew for sure was that Mako had better not go anywhere before he figured things out because he *never* wanted to go back to wherever he'd been before.

"Hey, uh, Mako?" Ryuko said, cutting through their preoccupation, "You know, he can help make a bandage around your finger if you put him on and transform and all."

"Huh? Oh! Oh my gosh I'm still bleeding!" Mako exclaimed, realizing that one of the fingers she'd been pressing to Tonbo's bodice was still bleeding directly into him.

"Yeah you uh, kinda drove the needle in pretty deep there," Ryuko said, very mildly concerned. She'd gone to stand by Satsuki now and murmured to her, "It's actually kind of impressive pain tolerance huh? But we probably should've practiced that part."

Mako lifted her finger and said, "Uh, Tonbo? Do you think you'll be ready to transform now?"

*[Oh, yes, certainly. One thing at a time, no?]* Far better that than grappling with this strange feeling that came over him when he thought about this other kamui who was to be his partner. What was she like? From Mako's memories he knew she was a veteran of countless battles, as fiercely protective of her as Ira was, and that when Ira read it was mostly her that actually did the reading. But who was she, really? No, no now was not the time for that.

The feeling of plummeting air pressure had not gone away. It was subtle thing, like a very faint breeze sweeping off of them, but as Mako donned Tonbo (Thinking to herself, *Wow, he's already so much better than normal clothes. Never had a dress that zips itself up before.*) the feeling in air only intensified.

"Geez, you feel that?" Barazo commented, looking up at the overcast sky, "Looks like Rei had the right idea bringing an umbrella along, feels like rain."

"What, are you becoming an old man now pops?" Mataro joked, "You gonna complain about how your knee's acting up?"

Houka added, "You're not wrong, but no rain is forecast for today. That feeling is entirely the product of your daughter's kamui."

"Shh!" Nonon hissed, "Stop being pedantic and watch!"

As Mako reached to flip her Seki-tekko – *Oh my god, this is really it!* – her hands began to tremble a bit. She couldn't help that, but it did not mean her resolve was wavering. Far from it, now that she was here and this was real it was impossible to contain her excitement.

"Ryuko can I-,"

"-Say it?" Ryuko correctly guess what Mako was going to ask and answered, "Sure you can, if you can get it all out. First time tends to be a little uncontrollable."



“Okay!” Mako cleared her throat and twisted the Sekki-Tekko bracelet on her wrist. As she felt the tiny prick of the needle prodding her skin she shouted:

“Life-Fiber Synchronize! Kamui Tonbo – whoa,” Mako just managed to get through it a strange feeling rose in her. Hyperfocus, heart racing, whole body trembling. Time seem to stand still her whole body lit up with an exhilarating burning, a rippling, rushing sensation as though she was plunging forth on the tip of a breaking tidal wave.

The sky darkened. Thunder rumbled. Static electricity arced off Mako’s body.

And then the tidal wave crashed down and for the briefest moment Mako’s eyes could be seen to go wide before with a huge **\*KRA-BOOM\*** the iconic column of flames erupted from her. Hers was brilliant sky blue – turning to white at the core from sheer brightness – and it had a kind of lashing, hyperactive energy that the others did not. It leapt through the clouds, poking a whole clean through them.

And it began to rain.

This wasn’t the sort of gradual, building rainstorm that started with a drizzle. No, it began instantaneously at full volume, filling the air with sheets of rain. The wind whipped in a frenzy, as though deep inside a hurricane. It was as though the clouds were dumping everything, dissipating all their water in their haste to escape from the blazing light.

It was hard for the assembled group not to gasp and exclaim in shock. Ryuko reacted fast and transformed the part of her that made up Satsuki’s outfit into a raincoat, then in a flash produced umbrellas made from her own life-fibers for Barazo and Sukuyo.

“My god!” Shiro shouted, struggling to keep his face serious despite his excitement

“Isn’t it fascinating!” Houka agreed. He was not afraid to smile; his face cracked with a huge grin, “So this is peak life-fiber compatibility! They are so powerful together they can *change the weather!*”

~~~~~

Just as swiftly as the beam of blue flames appeared it dissipated, leaving drifts of little cerulean embers floating in the air. The rain ceased too, and without it the hole Tonbo had made in the clouds glowed, spreading light rays down around them. The clouds were indeed retreating, drifting apart in every direction so the circle of blue sky above became ever wider.

*[So this is our power... this is what we are meant to do.]*

In the midst of all of it, Mako opened her eyes. She saw the kamui shaking themselves dry as the others stared up at her. She was still in the daze of that rush of energy, so it took a second to realize that *They look kinda small. And they’re tilting their heads really far back... wait a second!*

Her feet weren’t on the ground

“Ahh! Ahahahaaaaah!” Mako shouted, both elated and a bit alarmed to find herself floating above almost twenty feet above the stone plinth. She whipped around, trying to figure out

how to get herself to go up or down, and in so doing noticed the gloves that had suddenly come into existence around her hands. “Ohmygosh, we did it!”.

She held her hands up in front of her, admiring them. The gloves were a soft cream color, but on closer inspection the weave of their fabric contained innumerable tiny strands of pale yellow-green that made them glint smoothly. They ran almost to Mako’s elbows, blending slowly into a more green color as they went, and ended in cuffs about two inches wide, pure blue and softly glowing.

“Oh for the love of-,” Nonon huffed from down on the ground, “Of course she gets to fly right off the bat!”

*[That glow,]* Seijitsu added wonderingly. *[It’s almost like they’re halfway to a kisaragi form already!]*

“Yeah, well didn’t you say Ryuko that your new kisaragi form isn’t really about being more powerful, but what you know about controlling your life-fibers?” Uzu asked. “Maybe Tonbo has a more instinctive understanding of his powers than most kamui do.”

“Ryuuuuko! We don’t know how to get down!” Mako shouted.

“Or maybe not.”

Ryuko chuckled and said, “Be right there Mako! Sats, pass the mirror?”

Satsuki had come prepared not only with Mako’s new baseball bat but with a full-length mirror for Mako and Tonbo to see themselves in. She handed it over and Ryuko drifted off the ground to float in front of Mako. “Holy shit, you look *so* cool Mako. Check it out.”

Mako let out an excited, “Oooh!” as she admired herself. She’d caught a glimpse of the rest of Tonbo’s form on her body but seeing it in all its glory gave her a jolt of pure joy. There were essentially three pieces to it: a short black tube-top with a four-pointed-star pattern in sky blue on each breast, leggings, and a jacket. The leggings began with a high-thighed thonglike portion – a strip of blue a few inches wide that connected by thin straps to the tube-top on Mako’s sides. Just above the knee another strip of blue marked the transition from leggings to equally skintight high heeled boots, which had lines of blue stars running along them and ended in glassy black heels.

The jacket portion shared the same color scheme as the rest of Tonbo’s powered-up form – shimmering, grassy green with sky blue trim that softly glowed. Unlike the rest though, which were solid colors, the jacket had the same webbing, that dragonfly-wing pattern and on the inside the typical life fiber void. Its sleeves were short and wide and draped over Mako’s upper arms, its collar was popped, and in the back it was split into two tails that dragged down to about Mako’s knees, looking for all the world like fairy wings. And that impression was only magnified because Tonbo’s eyes almost resembled wings too – Ryuko’s ethereal kisaragi wings, to be precise. They were not attached to rest of the outfit at all but hovered above and slightly in front of her shoulders, tapering but very wide in the middle like leaves. The golden-orange pools were surrounded by a mantle of blue that seemed to drip glowing embers into the breeze.

Mako started to tear up, looking at it. She couldn’t have imagined herself looking so glamorous, so easily elegant. She said, “Wow Tonbo, you really catch my good side!” And then to Ryuko, poking at the tube top “Look at this, huh? I’ve got almost as good a rack as you now!”

*[Well thank you. But I feel I should tell you that this was not by my design. I wouldn't have known where to begin,]* Tonbo said.

“Oh, well then in that case he looks even better this way Ryuko! You're so amazing!”

Ryuko chuckled and said, “No, I didn't make this form of his either. This is just what you two are together.” She ruffled Mako's head and Mako flinched.

“Ah! Hey, that tickles!” She put her hands over her head to stop Ryuko and in so doing noticed something else. Her hair was whipped back, flowing behind her quite unlike the normal Mako bowl-cut, and erupting from her scalp right above her forehead was a pair of sky-blue life-fiber antennae. Like the other blue trim around her outfit, they glowed softly and were wide. In fact they were more oval shaped than regular antennae, though pointed at the ends. She watched her hands move up to the tips and gave an experimental tug, confirming that yes, those were really there. “Whoaaa.”

“Bunny ears,” Ryuko observed with a grin.

“Wha-Shut up! They're not bunny ears!” Mako said indigantly.

“Hey, what's wrong with that? They look cute.” And Mako relented. After all, if Ryuko thought they were cute then there was no problem. “So, how're you feeling?” Mako just grinned and laughed at that one. “That good, huh?”

“Can we, like, go now?” She asked, “Are we done? Because-,”

“-You guys want to go try your powers out?” Mako nodded vigorously, “I'm a mind reader, I know.”

*[Only, we still don't know quite how to get down,]* Tonbo pointed out. *[As much as I don't wish to look foolish at our first meeting, Lady Matoi-]*

Ryuko blinked, “-What? You're kidding, right? You call me Ryuko, okay? Now cmon, let's get you down to Earth.” She dropped the mirror – which would have been a very foolish move if there weren't a group of kamui wearers standing right there. But instead Uzu snagged it out of the air like it was nothing. Then Ryuko took Mako by the shoulders and slowly floated her down to the ground.

“I feel so light!” Mako said, bouncing up and down with how energized she felt. “I won't drift off again if I jump too high, will I?”

“Well, there's only one way to find out,” Ryuko said. “How 'bout it guys, want to show Mako the ropes?”

Of course, they did. Ryuko took the briefest moment to clap Mako on the shoulder before jumping, rocketing up above the skyline, and the other followed, transforming as they leapt like fireworks exploding above the forest.

*[Try to keep up, huh?]*

“Only because they know we can,” Mako said, and without giving herself time to question if it would really work she leapt with all her might. Her gut dropped as she found herself hurtling

upwards into the air, towards where the others hung, some flying and others gliding towards the nearest skyscraper. Down below the ground was receding so rapidly that Mako laughed just from the sheer exhilaration of it.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass side of one of the skyscrapers. She hadn't even realized how wide she'd been grinning. *So this is what Mataro meant when he said, 'I never knew what being alive really meant until today'.*

~~~~~

"And this is the spot!" Mataro said, landing on the patio with a hardly a noise. Mako, on the other hand, skidded to a stop. She came careening in fast, and barely managed to miss a table. "Hahaha, still having trouble learning the ropes, eh?"

"Naw, we're doing fine – he really go that thing Ryuko said about pulling yourself along the currents in the air, it's just landings!" Mako answered indignantly as Tonbo powered down. "But whatever, we can *fly*! Who cares about landing, not like it hurts any!"

*[Well, I for one would like to master landing as well,]* Tonbo said.

"Pssh, fine, if you really want to we can practice landing sometime. Not now though!"

*[Quite true. So, this is the Matoi Mansion. Your second home, so to speak.]*

They had – along with Ryuko, Satsuki, and the rest of the kamui corps, spent all afternoon zipping around Tokyo, putting on quite a display of their powers of mobility for amazed onlookers. They didn't do that often enough, didn't spend enough time just enjoying what the kamui were capable of. And at the end they had decided to run or fly all the way from Tokyo to the Matoi Mansion. Mataro had taken Mako and Tonbo to the same patio he and Wakaiketsu had vanished too halfway through their party. It was connected to another mansion across the lake, this one with a more European style – brick and columns and ivy, beautiful but imposing. Still, the patio went right up to the water's edge and afforded a beautiful sight of the amber glow coming from the Matoi Mansion. The party, it seemed, was already starting.

"Yup! Isn't it beautiful?"

Tonbo, with his very limited frame of reference, had never seen a place more gorgeous. Something about the abstract mess of the party lights was very appealing to a kamui's sense of aesthetics.

*[It's amazing. The most amazing place in a very amazing world,]* He agreed.

"Okay we're going to go get the party started, but no rush, okay? This's same place we hung out at, it's peaceful, right?"

"Yeah, thanks bro! We'll be there soon."

As he leapt up, Mako sat down on a bench next to the water.

*[So, uh, what do you want to talk about?]* Tonbo asked, hesitantly. As they had spent the afternoon flying around, so many questions had come into his mind. He tried to drink in Mako's memories, in small bursts so she wouldn't be overwhelmed, but his heart hadn't really been in it.

Zooming between the skyscrapers, executing daring dives under bridges and low swoops over cheering crowds, it was all *so* fun. There was a strong instinct in him to slow down, be serious – he knew nothing about the world, it behooved him to learn (especially because he was getting the weird feeling he might be someone important). But that just wasn't possible when he was roaming with his tribe, with the other kamui, feeling way their auras resonated between them.

Especially Tekketsu. She was watching him, not that different from how her wearer was admiring Mako. Sizing him up, trying to figure out what he was capable of. Did she like him? Was it supposed to matter this much if she did or didn't?

Mako said, "I want to fly again."

*[Oh, uh, sorry. We can transform if you want. I'd be lying if I said I'm not tired of flying either.]*

"No, no we can't. Because if we do we might make it rain again. Happened after we took lunch break too, remember?"

*[Is rain that big of a deal?] He asked, but a quick scan of Mako's memories told him what he needed to know. [Oh, nevermind, I see that many people quite dislike rain. But the smart ones know it grows crops, grows plants. Brings life.]*

"We can do that."

*[Huh?]*

"If we can make it rain, then we can bring it to people who need it," Mako said, as the idea was just dawning on her. Tonbo liked the sound of that. He knew that people cheered for Mako because she'd done something to deserve it – saved the world, actually. Doing things to deserve it, was that what they were supposed to do?

*[Do we have to?] He asked.*

Mako could tell he was asking out of genuine curiosity. "Well no, but-,"

*[That could be nice. I was thinking. Actually, I was hoping you could tell me something. Is doing something like that what we – I – was made for?]*

That question took Mako off guard. "Ryuko made you for me, you know that."

*[I do, but I can't help but feel like there's more to it than that. All the rest, they fight. Now I know you don't want to do that, and I... don't really know what it's like. You're probably smarter than them for that. But still, they justify their existence. I don't know a lot, but I know us Kamui don't come into the world as easy as humans. So don't you think that people will feel we should justify my existence?]*

Mako propped her head on her hands and said, "Honestly I was thinking something like that too. Maybe we'll be able to do that by bringing the rain. But you're wrong."

*[Really?]*

"You don't need to justify anything to anybody. You're here for me," She giggled, "It's so funny, Ryuko always used to talk to Senketsu and we'd think she was talking to herself. I used

to wonder what that was like for her. Well, now I know. That's enough to *justify* you to me."

*[I see. You really admire Ryuko, don't you?]*

"Of course I do. She's Ryuko. I love her, only love my folks more. And Ira just the same."

*[What, Mataro doesn't rate?]*

"Hah! He's with Satsuki on rung three. It ain't that much further down," Mako laughed, "That's one thing I should tell you about humans is there's no way anyone's annoying little brother is number one or probably even two on their most loved list."

*[I could have guessed as much. I was just messing with you. But what else can you tell me about humans?]*

"Oh, tons, tons, I even wrote it all down on my phone!" Mako said excitedly, "Let's see here..."

They sat there talking about life and humans and every little detail Mako thought it would be important to know (half of which she now thought were completely silly). The afternoon was becoming evening when a voice came from the path that lead around the mansion.

"Mako! There you are!" It was Ira, with a platter of hors d'oeuvres in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other hand. And Tekketsu.

"Ira!" Mako shouted, flinging her arms wide. She hurried over to hug him.

"So this is where you went. Mataro was less than helpful. He told me it wouldn't be in the spirit of it."

*[To be fair, that is very like him,]* Tekketsu said for Tonbo's benefit.

*[He has a great respect for tradition?]*

*[Our traditions. Others not so much. In any case, we had to find you. I, uh, have been hoping I'd get the chance to speak to you.]*

*[Oh. I was hoping the same, actually. We're...going to be spending a lot of time together. Who better to ask question and, well, I have a lot.]*

*[We all did, I understand that,]* Tekketsu said.

As they talked Ira and Mako sat down, and Ira filled her in on what had been happening at the party. She quickly dove on the platter (though the baked pastries had long since gone cold) and Ira motioned to the champagne and said, "I brought this, too. I know, I know," He said before she could protest, "But this isn't 'getting drunk alcohol' it's champagne. A glass at a celebration won't do you any harm."

Mako looked at the bottle and the little glass and then at Ira and said, "No, it's okay, I'll try some. It is a very special day and all."

“That’s good. The others’ll be happy to hear that, it is a bit of Kamui Corps tradition. I don’t expect we’ll see you trying soldier vodka anytime soon, but it would just be weird if you didn’t drink *at all*.”

Mako laughed at that, “Yeah, well don’t expect miracles out of me, I don’t think I’ll be as good at it as Aikuro or anything. And if I get a hangover, I’m *so* blaming you.”

“One glass never gave anyone a hangover. But if it comes to that... I’ve got nothing better to do than watch TV in bed with you all tomorrow. And if you’re really worried about that eat more fir-,” Mako was already eating. He swiftly uncorked the bottle and began pour, sayin, “Yeah, yeah, you don’t need to be told twice.”

*[Ah, Mako what are these? They’re lovely!]* Tonbo asked as Mako shoved a crab ragoon into her mouth with reckless abandon.

“Huh? Oh! ‘S a crab ragoon. You like ‘em? I think they’re a little rich for appetizers but Nonon can’t get enough of them.”

“... But you’re eating them anyway,” Ira said.

*[Oh, nevermind that Ira. What I’m more interested in is you, Tonbo.]*

*[What about?]*

*[You enjoy eating? It’s surprising. I don’t know another kamui who does.]*

Tonbo didn’t know what to say, *[But don’t you taste everything Ira does? How couldn’t you?]*

*[Sure, but... that’s a human thing. I don’t know it means nothing to me. So long as he’s energized and happy, I don’t care.]*

*[That’s so strange. I would have guessed it was one of life’s great pleasures. But what can I say?]* He would have shrugged if he could. *[I’m an epicurean, I suppose.]*

Sheer amazement from Tekketsu, *[Mako knew the word ‘epicurean’? No way!]*

*[I think she’s as surprised as you are. But see this is exactly what I mean, I have so many questions to ask. Without you I would have just assumed what I experienced was totally normal. But then, it’s been a crazy day.]*

*[Believe it or not, you got off easy. Us in the first generation were all awoken at once, in a big stadium.]*

*[No kidding. Now you have to tell me about that.]*

~~~~~

Evening turned into night. The lights from the party were still lively. And the hors d’oeuvres and champagne both were gone.

“You... think we should go back?” Ira asked.

“Nnnah!” Mako shouted. She was ambling along a long bench that directly overlooked the water, an extremely slow and drunken goose-step that threatened to send her into the water with every step. “I like it here.”

Ira nodded. He was watching with a sated smile from a longue chair and he said, “You know, we could buy this place.”

“Really? No shit. Oops! Heehee – ssorry!”

“It’s true. All the mansions here don’t have owners. They got arrested for being REVOCS.”

“But it looks so nice!” Mako said, “Not abandoned. Empty. You know?”

“Well, all the people who work her still come in to work because Ryuko pays them to keep the neighborhood nice. And a lot of them live here too. It’s a gated community run by its butlers.”

“Well that’s nice for the butlers.”

“But what do you think? We could buy this house if you want.”

“Mmm. Nah. I like our house,” She said.

Ira chuckled, “Me too.”

“If we did one day though, I’d have to do something first to justify it. I’m gonna too, you know that? Like, maybe me and Tonbo can go out to visit a desert somewhere. Give ‘em some rain.”

Ira sat up. “Actually? Because crazy thought, what if we brought you to Krakatoa. Maybe you could something to the air currents or... I don’t know. Make the ash go away. Heh, if Shiro were here he’d either kiss me if that would work or spend the next half hour explaining how stupid I am if not. Fifty-fifty.”

“No, no that’s good! That’s really good! I think that – who-whoaaa!” Mako lost her balance, tilting towards the water with her arms pinwheeling uncontrollably and her eyes big and wide.

*[I’ve got you!]* Tonbo shouted as he froze Mako up and activated his levitation (in this moment of duress he found that he could do this without powering up, though his max flight speed was far lower this way). She froze right above the water, laying horizontal in the air.

“Cooooool...” She said, eyes inches away from the glassy surface.

“Mako!” Ira was up on his feet in an instant, scooping her up in his arms.

“Whoa, thanks you guys! Hehe, that was close, huh?”

“It’s deep here, be more careful!” Ira exclaimed.

Instead of answering that, Mako kissed him. First on the nose and then on the lips. “You look cute when you’re worried.”



“No. I don’t. Definitely not.”

“You look even cy-uter when you’re flustered. Take me to the chair?” She asked, and despite his protests he did.

*[My goodness but she is a lightweight, isn’t she?] Tonbo said, awkwardly. Ira had sat down with Mako in his lap, laying across his chest. Tonbo was pressed right up into Tekketsu.*

*[They both are,] She answered. [All the rest of their friends have remarkable tolerance, but not these two.]*

Ira and Mako were not really paying attention to their conversation at this point. It wasn’t much a conversation though, just an awkward staring contest. Then Tekketsu said, *[I’m afraid another one of those human things is going to happen soon.]*

*[Yes. I’m afraid you are right. And I don’t think I’ll like this one as much.]*

*[I should hope not!] She tried to be light about it. But the truth of the matter was that this would be their first night together, with this kamui who would be her partner. He seemed clever, sensitive, and utterly lost – but then it was only his first day in the world. What would he be like once they got to know each other? No choice but to find out. [But seriously, it isn’t that big of a deal. I’ve seen them go at it plenty, and all the other kamui have had the same experience.]*

*[But with me here?]*

*[... It might take some getting used to again. You know, the humans have a concept called an ‘arranged marriage’. Practiced in many cultures across their history.]*

*[Yes Mako is aware of that concept. She has lots of thoughts about an event called the “Australia Debacle” involving that.]*

*[I’ll need to tell you that story. But-]*

*[The comparison is not lost on me, I understand that much. We have been ‘arranged married’.]*

Tekketsu wanted to laugh at the way that Tonbo dragged himself through that last sentence, but she felt for it too. And felt scared by it. Was he unhappy with the idea? *[It would seem so.]*

*[Yes...]*

*[Well-]*

*[But I think I’m happy for that,] Tonbo said.*

*[You are? Really?]*

*[You seem like a reliable person. I think you and I will get along well. And I think I’m going to be glad to... have you to help me find my place. And know you won’t be going anywhere.]*

The sudden flow of warmth inside Tekketsu was intimidating. *Shit, I think maybe this is what it feels like. What Ira feels when he looks at Mako. What the fuck? [No, I won’t.]*

Author's Note: Tonbo's powered up form is a reference to another Studio Trigger leading lady, Yoko from Gurren Lagann. Specifically it's her Super Galaxy outfit, too good a design to pass up.

[Picture of that because it won't let me attach the picture for some reason](#)

# The Fate of the Matoi Fortune: 1

## Chapter Summary

Splitting this one because I just had so much fun writing this segment it came out way longer than I was planning.

June 2068

~~~~~

“So, where will you go?”

“I’ll cover the western flank, on the right,” Satsuki said to Ryuko. They stood on a ridge line with their back to the mountains, overlooking the vast tract of ruined suburbs that surrounded Miyun, a reservoir just north of Beijing. The terrain was rough and hilly, and the fingers of the reservoir wound in and out among docks and streets and shattered houses. In the distance, columns of enemy tanks and mechs were visible as tiny dots creeping over the hills, and the islands in the center of the lake were smoking, laid barren by the battles that had been fought there. Flashes of light from the islands gave a sign that Uzu and Seijitsu were still out there, acting as the vanguard on their own. “Uzu will keep holding the middle and the road to the east has been burned out, so the enemy armor appears to be trying to hit our camp via the highway on the west. I imagine that their infantry is operating in advance of the main column through the forests?”

“Oh yeah,” Ryuko could pick their tiny forms out easily with her ultra-focused vision, “They’re about halfway along the side of the lake, not to our boys yet.” There was a place where collapsed buildings narrowed the highway and made a sort of natural wall, and in there the allied reconquest troops were hiding, waiting for the enemy to come close.

“Then all is as it should be. And you don’t expect Ranketsu will return today?”

“No chance. Seems those things can only fight for a couple hours without wearing their hosts out, and Uzu tuckered her out this morning,” That was the first time Ryuko had gotten to glimpse a fight with one of the enemy kamui. Didn’t look too bad. She could’ve taken it, if it weren’t for the fact that there was now a modest but definitely noticeable rise to her belly. Hell, now that she’d seen it Ranketsu was like a figment of her imagination, she was practically salivating for a chance to see what it could really do. But no matter how much she yearned to fight something that could fight back, there was something else that was just more important.

“A shame,” Satsuki nodded, “I should have liked to try my hand on it. Or failing that, Uzu is in fine form today. He might have been able to slay it if it hadn’t backed off.”

“I know,” Ryuko chuckled. “The damn things *hate* him. Almost doesn’t feel fair.”

“Indeed. Oh, and before I go,”

“Hmm?”

“Want to give me a little more nondescript clothes? I’ll stand out in the ‘default dress’ and that’s not that fun,” Satsuki motioned to the outfit of Ryuko’s life-fibers she was wearing, which was in its most standard form – a short and simple sky-blue dress with a blue and gold sash.

“You got it,” Ryuko turned to Satsuki and traced her hands along her sides, warping the dress into a standard military outfit – a dark blue-grey jumpsuit, bulletproof vest, and a gasmask to boot. Now she would look like little more than an ordinary army sergeant until the enemy were too close to run.

“How do I look?” Satsuki rasped, muffled by the gas mask.

“Drab as they come. Now give ‘em hell sweetie.”

Rei was also standing on the ridge, with Furashada on her shoulders, holding binoculars for her to observe the developing battle. She looked over and said, “You’re not taking a weapon? I thought you were going to pick out one of the spares from the lab.”

Satsuki shrugged, “Did you really think I’d find a replacement for Bakuzan?”

“Nah, guess not.”

“I did try a few, but there was nothing that felt quite right. So, in the end I figured why bother? And besides, this way I kill as few as them as possible, and really is that not the point of sending me instead of letting them battle it out with our soldiers?” Ryuko gave Satsuki a thumbs up and a “Mhm” of agreement.

Rei nodded. There was honestly something satisfying to the idea that Satsuki had chosen Bakuzan as *her* sword. Ryuko too with her scissors – those blades were extensions of themselves, of their image. And she got it; at first her axe had been merely a tool for cleaving through life-fibers but now her mastery of it made it the only one worth using. “Not like you need it anyway,” She said to Satsuki.

“Also very true, there is a certain something to feeling a tank crumple beneath your fist. Doesn’t really get old.”

And with that she was off, skidding confidently down the rocky side of the ridge and bounding between rooftops and trees. She would slip into the friendly ranks and wait until the advance infantry drew near to reveal herself.

“Now,” Ryuko said, turning away from the developing battle and towards Rei, “Back to what you were saying. How the hell is it possible that I have *more* money now than Sats did when she inherited the Kiryuin fortune? I-I mean it makes no sense; we should have spent almost all of it by now I thought!”

“You really don’t read your bank statements, do you?” Rei shook her head. “It’s okay, you get a bunch of them from a bunch of different banks. But it’s true, your net worth has gone up about 35% from where it stood four years ago. And that’s just in raw value, because the yen’s value has skyrocketed the true value of your fortune is probably, like, almost three times what Ragyo had.”

Ryuko’s mouth hung open. Rei looked dead serious, obviously she was not messing around. But that just *couldn’t* be true! “But *how!* I sign like fifty checks for the foundation every

morning! The plan was to spend it all doing good things, not just let it accumulate!” She said in astonishment.

“Oh, I see,” *Right, Ryuko hasn’t studied economics! This is not so simple to her.* “The thing is your money isn’t just sitting in vault somewhere. Most of your fortune isn’t in banks, but investments. Stocks. The Kiryuin fortune is – and has been – the main prop-up for the global economy because you own so many shares in so many companies all around the world. And that does include countries that hate our guts like America, Russia, India, and all those other big and powerful dictatorships.”

“R-right, but-,”

Rei held up a hand, “Hold on, let me finish explaining. I get it, why does that mean the number goes up? Well, for one thing a rising water lifts all boats. The economy is doing well – better than it was, anyway – so you’ll see return on investments just because of that. And Satsuki’s done a really good job managing all of this. She makes sure to only pick corporations she thinks will give good returns. Not because she doesn’t want it all gone, mind, because she definitely does, but-,”

“Now that I get. Satsuki’d never mismanage a damn thing,” Ryuko chuckled, “But I mean, this is bad isn’t it? She’s kind of working against us here. ‘Cuz all that money is just sitting there doing nothing?”

“Oh, certainly. Don’t get me wrong, for anyone to have that much money is just... appalling, ridiculous, *monstrous*, whatever, and the system that got us into this situation is the same but being real we still live under that system. Well, kind of, Satsuki disbanded the megacorps in Japan and the League countries, and I hope we can go further but as it stands the system needs big investors like your fortune. That’s just part of the way it works.”

“Right,” Ryuko said. “And, um, what are your plans for ‘the system’, anyway?”

“Big question. In what capacity?”

“Well, I mean look,” She pointed towards the western flank, behind the first line of defense where transport helicopters were parked in an overgrown plaza. “Those still use oil, don’t they?”

“Furashada?” Rei motioned for him to lower the binoculars, “Yeah, those old ones were appropriated from the Chinese army. We’ve got others, new models that use the magnetic-gyro engines or hydrogen. But I see your point.”

“Yeah. It’s only that I hear a lot about how bad the environment is. You know, on the news it’s just... deserts burying cities, floods, starving kids, you know. And when we first decided that, uh, *she* would be a hybrid like me,” Ryuko pointed to her belly, “Satsuki and Shiro said a lot about how it was the only way to make sure she’d be safe from what’s coming when we start running out of food. I just want to make sure, you know, we’re gonna have a plan and everything.”

“Right. I’m... happy to hear you’re worried about this,” Rei said, and she meant it. This wasn’t the sort of thing Ryuko usually worried about. Even once she’d become queen, she knew she had people around her with the education to handle the big questions about the future (and, importantly, that was the sort of thing they liked to do). But now it was different, more personal for her. *The common fate of our civilization is a question too big for Ryuko, Rei and Furashada*

correctly concluded, *She need not worry about it for her own sake because she will be alright no matter what. And she need not worry for ours because we will be dead before things get **really** bad. But for her daughter, that is a different story.* “Hate to tell you, but food shortages have already started.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I only wish. When was the last time you were in a supermarket?” Rei asked.

Probably meant to be a pointed question, but it didn’t take more than a second for Ryuko to say, “Just before we came to the mainland. Sats and I went with Mako to her favorite cheese counter.”

“Oh. Well, did you look at the prices for things?”

“... Not really, no.”

“Alright well next time you do take a look at just the price for something as basic as a bag of rice,” Rei said, and then, “I mean, we don’t have one in front of us, but I can tell you on average the price for rice has nearly doubled in the last two years.”

“Wha – doubled!” Back in Ryuko’s harder years rice was always a precious commodity (Sukuyo couldn’t exactly substitute it with scrap meat) but that was beyond anything she was expecting. “You’re serious! How the hell does anyone live?”

“Less comfortably than they ought to,” Was all Rei could say. “We’re doing what we can, but this is just the sorry truth. The world is running out of everything, and fast.”

“...So what are we doing?”

Rei sighed, “Well, to be honest for now the best we *can* do is help The League heal and brace for the coming storm. You’ve toured around, you’ve seen the devastation REVOCS leaves in its wake. If we don’t provide every tool possible to rebuild all the countries we’ve wound up responsible for, there’s no way they’ll be ready. How can the people left deal with food shortages when they don’t even have roads, laws, jobs, or any culture or homes worth defending? They need to get back to that level first. Nothing super revolutionary about this stage. A rational balance between strong, top-down control on things like environment protection and human rights which people are terrible at when you let them handle it themselves and then on the other hand providing all the money and resources they need to live on their own terms. And then, while this is going on, we take what opportunities show up to tighten things up.”

“Tighten up. Meaning?” Ryuko asked.

“Meaning simply moving things in the direction they will need to go. And *that* means that are our world becomes more barren The League will have to operate as one nation – I’d take in the whole world if I could but I don’t think that’s possible except by conquest, which would do more harm than good. And that one nation will need to be a smoothly operating, controlled economy. People will work the jobs they are appointed to, receive fair distributions of food, water, housing, and everything else. We will relocate those who lose their homes to flooding or desertification, and who gets what education will be based on what their aptitudes are and what society needs them to do, not what they can afford. Call it communism, or permanent apocalypse rationing, or whatever you like but if we don’t the rich will hoard everything in their gated

communities and everyone else will starve or turn to violence, and I won't accept those options. Nobody should."

"Geez. I didn't know it went so far as that." Ryuko shook her head, "I always thought if you really wanted things to be that way you would be some crazy radical and already be like, pushing for that."

"Well, where would that get me?" Rei chuckled, "Satsuki feels about the same way about it, ask her if you want to know more. But everyone else it would just scare off. And that besides, what good would it do? We'll be asking people to go along with huge changes to the basics of how society... works, in general. There's all sorts of things that need to be traditionally ingrained before that happens; people need festivals and holidays, courts and elections they can trust, museums and parks and libraries. If we don't make sure there are things like that, it would really be like being thrust into an alien world. I think everyone wants to know that even while we do what we have to do to survive, we'll still have what really matters in life. Because if they don't then what is the point in the end?"

Ryuko thought about that for a moment and said, "You're really smart Rei."

Rei looked taken aback for a moment, but she said, "Uh, thank you. I admit I wasn't really thinking about your reaction there for a second, just ranting. So I'm glad you see it that way."

"What, you thought *I* was gonna be scared off? Still sounds a hell of a lot better than Honnou-town," Ryuko chuckled. "But seriously, do you think it will work?"

"Perfectly? No, it won't be without problems. I expect there will be some wars, over water and cropland and oil reserves and such, but then we have Kamui. I don't think even the Americans will want to *seriously* test themselves on that. And the ugly reality is that --,"

"-Things slip through the cracks."

"Right. But still, the question isn't if humanity will survive at all, you know. We're a hardy species, and there are a lot of us. No, it's how we will survive. If we'll be able to keep our civilization intact, or if we will lose everything and be reduced to square one."

"Like in any of a million post-apocalypse movies. Stone Age Two."

"More like medieval age, really. You know what I mean, you see it beginning in the way they worship you. And that is how REVOCS worked in Ragyo's day, too. Desperation turns people into easily manipulated savages, and you can hardly blame them. But that can lead to a very dark place," Rei concluded.

"Yeah, I hear ya." Ryuko was distracted before Rei could begin another lecture about the dangers of monarchy. The enemy tanks trundling down the western highway rounded a bend, putting them in an open line of sight to the fortifications. "Oh, check it out! Satsuki's gonna have her fun at last."

That got Rei's attention and she quickly turned to watch. Sure, her concern was mostly with the civic side of the reconquest, but that didn't mean a kamui's innate love of battle had not trickled into her, "Ah, Furashada, let's see what she can do now!"

*[You look through these.]* He lowered the binoculars before her eyes and said, *[And I'll look through your eyes and these.]* Rei grinned (this being a little joke of theirs).

“Fun look you two got going on,” Ryuko said, which was true enough. Furashada looked like some sort of fabricky creature, a plush cat or a ferret, slouching over her shoulders and head. Quite large in comparison to Rei’s otherwise diminutive body, only accentuated because on a hot day like this all she wore on the front lines was a tank top and army fatigues. Easy enough to shed when combat called and she needed to wear Furashada.

“What?” Rei called, unable to hear her as at the same time a chorus of *\*POW\**s rose from behind them. The artillery back in the main camp were opening fire, and after a momentary silence the front of the armored column and all the surrounding, low lying buildings were turned into a field of fire and as the shells hit all at once. But it did little good; the inferno died down and out of the black smoke the first of the tanks roared, filling the highway in staggered rows of four and five. Ryuko and Rei could watch as their armor reformed and shaped itself anew, dim red glows forming and sealing around torn parts. As one, their turrets turned towards the barricade and began firing, pounding ineffectually off toppled walls that – having already become rubble – could not be further destroyed.

“Wow, those are Abrams retrofitted with life-fiber cores, aren’t they?” Rei said with an appreciative whistle. “Guess we know who’s selling their surplus to REVOCS, huh?”

“If you say so,” Ryuko shrugged, “They move along pretty quick though, must have some good gear under the hood.”

“Uh, yeah. Tanks can *fly* on open ground.”

“Cool.”

At that moment, a tiny human form they both instantly recognized dashed across the street, looking unassuming enough, like a sergeant rushing to see to a wounded squadmate. The machine gun on one of the first tanks opened fire on the nondescript soldier, dust clouds licking around her. Ryuko could tell one of them had hit her and bounced off harmlessly, but to anyone else it looked like the burst had just missed, and now the soldier was frozen in terror.

The tank fired its main turret at her. This time it was a direct hit, like a cone of smoke suddenly sprung out of her and plumed back behind her. But then it died down, and when it did there she stood. Unharmed and limber, in combat stance.

“Oh, she’s *grinning* right now,” Ryuko said gleefully.

The tanks stopped.

The soldier ripped off her gas mask and threw it aside, where it dissolved before it hit the ground. And there was Satsuki’s short, shining black hair, waving in the summer breeze.

The tanks started backing up. Too late.

A thin line of torn asphalt and rippling air suddenly appeared, and this was the only sign that Satsuki had sprung forward which the naked eye could see. Only suddenly she was there, hands crunching down on the tank that had shot at her’s turret. Squeezing it down thin enough to grasp like a baseball bat. Now she wasted no time, swinging the tank as though it were a flyswatter,



lifting it high above her head and bashing the others on the left and right, dashing both of them to pieces and gouging huge craters into the road below.

“Woooo!”

“Woooo!” Ryuko and Rei cheered together.

Now content that the tanks in front of her were scrap, Satsuki paused for just long enough for the life-fibers to slink out of their cores and into her clothing. Ryuko looked to Rei and laughed, “ ‘S another reason why I like watching her fight. I get a snack.” Satsuki then leaned back on her heels and spun the remains of the tank with the full strength of her body, once, twice, and then let it fly. It hurtled down the ranks, crashing with enough force to rend everything it hit into a tornado of metal. Ryuko could hear the forceful grunt of focused exertion from miles away.

In front of Satsuki now lay the smoldering wreckage of nearly half the armored column. Tanks and legged mechs all turned to chunks of smoking metal, with life-fibers creeping out from among them like furtive deep-sea worms. The tank she had thrown had flung right off the highway at the bend and crashed through several blocks of housing before it turned to dust. But their crews were all wearing ultima uniforms and so with few exceptions survived all those blunt impacts and sharp bits of metal hurtling around them. They picked themselves up, heaving the wreckage off and as they converged all at once the derelict, overgrown ruins on every side were alive. REVOCS soldiers had been creeping up through them and now they saw that their only chance would be to rush this powerful enemy all at once.

“Ah, here they come! When you’re REVOCS and everyone has an ultima uniform I guess heavy armor is only for punching through walls and looking tough. And some of the higher ranking ones have hardened life-fiber blades, I think?” Rei commented.

Ryuko nodded, “Yup. A few of the Two-Stars do. So Satsuki doesn’t have to hold back now, watch this.”

Ryuko snapped her fingers and at once Satsuki’s outfit changed. In theory, Satsuki’s “Royal Consort’s Garb” could look like anything Ryuko (with her agreement) decided on, but there were two main forms she frequently returned to. There was the simple blue dress with the blue and gold sash, light and cool and comfortable for any casual situation – what she had begun the day wearing. And then there was the elaborate, dazzling kimono-like ceremonial dress, exactly like the physical outfit Ryuko had made her for the coronation, with its multihued, swirling shades evoking a flowing river. Now Ryuko reshaped the outfit into a version of that dress, unwinding and refashioning themselves in a single deft, sinuous move. Only while this version shared the same brilliant color patterns, it did not have the same flowing silkiness as usual. Rather it was cut to clearly be a gi and hakama, tough and flexible to move in.

“**HAA!**” Satsuki shouted, loud and clarion-clear, echoing off the hills. She hardly moved as the shimmering mass of REVOCS cultists descended on her, but at the sound of the shout they paused, wavered. It was as though a gust of wind had blasted out of her through their ranks.

“Whoa!” Rei exclaimed.

“Like that? That’s what we call her chi technique,” Ryuko grinned.

“What did she just do?”

“Oh, phsycially? Nothing. Freaks them the fuck out though,” The assembled REVOCS troops made no effort to resume their charge, converge on Satsuki, and hack her to bits. Rather, they formed a ring around her, pushing and shoving in an effort to not be the first one to try their luck.

“Ahh, an intimidation technique,” Rei said appreciatively.

“You could say that she has disrupted their chi – their internal fighting rhythm. And now they have no confidence,” Ryuko said proudly. “ ‘Course, it only works if you *believe* it works. Sats said, ‘If you only see it as yelling at someone, you’ll never convince your lungs to do the work’. And get this, she’s known how to do it since like, middle school or so. According to the guys, anyway, Uzu got a firsthand taste of it the first time they met. Ask her to tell you that story sometime.”

“I believe I shall,” Rei said, as the battle began again. None of the REVOCS cultists could work up the courage to approach, so without warning Satsuki surged forward, sending a man flying with a single kick, then leaping after him to catch up in the air. As they flew, Satsuki placed her hand on his forehead and his ultima uniform glowed orange and melted off him, slinking up her arm and absorbing into Ryuko via her sleeve. By the time they landed (Satsuki made sure to set him down fairly gently) he was fully nude and had slipped into unconsciousness from the shock of losing his life-fibers.

And now Satsuki was among them, wreaking a trail of havoc. Rei and Furashada would have had to power up in order to follow her moves, but Ryuko saw it all. The perfect, acrobatic weaving between attackers on all sides, slicing through them as if they weren’t there, dropping them with single, perfectly placed jabs. The moment she made contact it was over, and those few of them who managed to evade her long enough to get a swing in only found their arms pinned and their bodies hurled, tumbling inelegantly like barrels into their companions.

To Satsuki they were not a true opponent, one with a skilled mind which she needed to account for and anticipate. More like a single, ever-shifting obstacle course which she could take on however she saw fit; the true challenge was not her enemies, but herself. How fast could she defeat them? How deftly?

Ryuko, Rei, and Furashada watched with deep appreciation for Satsuki’s artistry as the field of shimmery purple and black around her turned into a multihued one of various unconscious, nude bodies. The already wavering cultists could stand and fight no longer – death was one thing, but an enemy that consumed their life-fiber uniforms off their bodies was just too humiliating. As soon as some of them began to turn and run, the rest correctly concluded that they were outclassed and suddenly a full rout had begun.

“Wow, now that is a rare sight,” Ryuko commented. “I don’t think I’ve seen the hardcore REVOCS guys run away once in my – not that long, it’s true - time out here. Ooh, wait a sec, the big boys are coming in.”

Ryuko had detected, as Furashada also had, that a squad of flying, three-star ultima uniform wearers. Five of them, *Medjay* models, with their lanky, humanoid form, wings with angry spinning rotors, and cockpit-mask that stretched to resemble the beaks of an eagle. They landed on the road, amidst their fleeing comrades, and immediately began to use their power over machines to seize the wreckage of the armored column. Cannons they fashioned on their wings like steel feathers angling down at Satsuki and opening fire immediately. Harmless though tank shells were

to Satsuki they could still knock her around, so without missing a beat she zipped forward towards them. But unlike her previous opponents they were just as fast and nimbly leapt aside, and around her the remaining wreckage on the road converge, slamming towards her.

If the intent was to cage her in Satsuki was a step ahead as always. She instead jumped *onto* the nearest metal scrap and then from there to the next, ascending them like stepping stones. One of the *Medjays* lunged at her and she seized the domed turret of a tank and hurled it at them, plunging them into a crater in the ground hundreds of yards away. Her flight towards her initial target continued unabated and now she landed a mighty punch right on the uniform's cockpit. Struck from above, the *Medjay* crumpled to its knees, but did not fall apart around its wearer immediately. It swung a taloned hand up to slice at Satsuki but instead she landed on it, slid down its shoulder and dropkicked it at the elbow, causing the arm to instead snap down to ground.

"Ah, I see. A three-star level is about the best you can put into that outfit," Rei came to the correct conclusion about what she was seeing.

"-Without overwhelming her, yeah," Ryuko nodded.

"So they're about equal in strength."

"Well, raw strength. *Real* strength though..." Ryuko trailed off, and to illustrate that point Satsuki had now gotten the first of the *Medjay* in a wicked armbar, pinned to the ground despite its twenty-foot height. Another came charging in towards her back. It seemed like an opening, but just as it drew close with a crackle and a *\*SNAP\** the arm of the pinned ultima uniform was wrecked completely free of its socket and Satsuki wheeled around and bashed that nearest enemy right across the face with it. At once Ryuko's life-fibers leapt from Satsuki's gi and dove into the empty shoulder of the *Medjay* which tried to pick itself up. It would never get the chance as those twisting red-orange threads skewered it like a horde of ravenous eels, and it went soft and melted into nothing, leaving a very confused woman to tumble to the ground.

But in this time, the surviving half of the armored column had arrived. Multi-story mechs – vaguely humanoid slabs of steel bristling with guns – fanned out around the four remaining *Medjay*. And some of the infantry, higher ranking two-stars mostly, rallied to swarm around them. The tanks began firing, a hailstorm of shells zooming all around her.

But Satsuki just threw her arms open wide and yelled, **"Well? Who will face me? I am but one woman!"**

"Geez," Rei chuckled. "Does she ever have guts." And when she looked over at Ryuko and saw her bouncing on tiptoes, giggling "eheeheehee," to herself, Rei smirked. "Wow, you two really are just made for each other, huh?"

**"No takers? None of you shall be the one to slay Satsuki Matoi?"** Satsuki shouted, and whether that was enough to goad them, or they'd just been waiting for the right moment all of a sudden the whole army lurched forward for the charge. First to meet her were the *Medjay*, one lancing at her with arms outstretched. That one was nimbly sidestepped and sent tumbling. The next lifted off in the air, swooping low to get behind her. Useless, she vaulted out of the way of another that came swiping and landed on its shoulders, delivering a rattling kick before leaping off again – this time to avoid an attempted from the fourth *Medjay* to seize her in its talons. She landed on that one's arm and now the fight was in the air, with the other *Medjay* beating through the sky after them like a flock of very big, very angry crows.

The terrain of the battle was now the ultima uniforms themselves, with Satsuki clambering and swinging across them with absolutely impeccable balance. All their flailing looked like little more than people desperately trying to catch a loose mouse. A cone of gunfire, illuminated by tracers, followed them up into the hot summer sky until suddenly *\*BYA-BOOM!\** Satsuki seized onto one of them and punched them back straight down to the earth, smashing through a mech and capsizing several tanks as the earth below buckled and gave way and the long since shattered highway collapsed into a ravine. And at it's center the *Medjay* crumpled under Satsuki's fist. Ryuko, from that great distance away, clapped her approval and Rei could *swear* she saw Satsuki give a sarcastic little bow. *She's having the time of her life right now.*

"You jealous? She's out there having the time of her life and look at you, forced to the sidelines because of your 'condition'," Rei jokingly needled Ryuko. Everyone knew that not being able to fight because she was pregnant was a massive sore spot for Ryuko. And since everyone knew it, she could hardly pretend to be *that* sensitive about it anymore.

"Oh, for sure I am," Ryuko answered, "But that looks fun and all only watch this." Ryuko pointed at one of the *Medjay* that was now flying down to fight Satsuki again. Let a tiny bit of the endless bulging power within her loose. Her wings of light erupted from behind her back, and a swirling vortex of light flashed into existence around her hand.

It almost didn't look real. A perfectly thin red line, glowing, stretching for miles between Ryuko's finger and the ultima uniform. She coiled it around the armored battlesuit's waist, pinning arms and wings down. All battle ceased as everyone took in this sight.

"Je-zus Christ," Rei blurted, dumbfounded. Even Furashada, fully aware of how much growing he still had left before he could compare to his creator in power, had no idea she could reach out from such a great distance.

"Right? It's the same basic premise as the whole 'mind stitching' thing Ragyo used to do. Only, that way of using it was totally fucked up, and this is just a *way* more precise long distance attack than those stupid big laser beams the enemy kamui use," Ryuko said, then sighed as she abruptly retracted the thread of life fiber, leaving the *Medjay* hovering stunned in midair.

Satsuki was not surprised to see Ryuko relinquish her hold – she merely was demonstrating something, not disrupting the fight – and wasted no time leaping up to it and hurling them back to earth by the foot. The battle continued, metal and cultists being thrown high into the air in every direction like a fountain. And Ryuko said to Rei, "So you see none of these guys will pose any sort of challenge to me. I won't fight someone who can't fight back, and even if I did it wouldn't be satisfying. So there's only so jealous I can be that Satsuki is challenging herself to take on so many small fry at once. Makes sense?"

Rei was once again reminded of just why she now realized she didn't love Ryuko. When they'd dated, Rei had only seen her fight their friends in sparring matches – a form of sport which Rei liked but nowhere near as much as Ryuko did. She hadn't seen that side of Ryuko that came alive in a true life or death struggle. The side which Satsuki, on the other hand, had been fascinated by ever since their first duel. So Rei nodded and said, "It does. And I'll say I do appreciate that you're not the kind of sadist who would lord your powers over others. It's funny, you both seem to have inherited the code of honor of a bygone age, who knows where it came from. Well, she had to learn it but you just seem to have it instinctively. But you know I respect it."

“ ‘Course!” Ryuko beamed, “And I respect that you’re a normal, sane person.” She chuckled to herself at that, and they watched the fight progress for a while. Then Ryuko said, “Hey, I’ve got another money question for ya.”

“Shoot.”

“Okay, so if you took mine and Sats’s money, how long would you be able to run the league just using that?”

Rei blew out a big breath, “Hoo, well that’s a complex question. Budget changes every year – never goes down though, of course. And your money makes more money from investments and interest. But if we just keep it simple and just use the numbers we’ve got now it’d be.”

[*Fourteen years and change,*] Furashada did the math faster.

“Fourteen years and make a dent in the fifteenth too!” Rei agreed with him. “Thanks Furashada.”

“Fifteen years,” Ryuko could barely believe it, “No fuckin’ shit.” After a while more watching Ryuko again said, “You know, it’s funny. I think through history if you really boil it down, most of the time people have gone to war it’s been to decide which tribe or country is going to be prosperous. First it was tribes, then different countries. Right?”

“Well, you’re boiling it down maybe further than you should – and also it kind of went back and forth between tribes and countries – but it’s not entirely wrong.”

“And then you get to like, World War 2 and everything after that and it’s about what kind of government all the different countries are going to have. And now, here we are,” She gestured over across the whole battlefield, “And we’re fighting to decide if the whole human species will survive or not. As far as the reason goes, I feel like they’ve only gotten better, but the stakes... it doesn’t really seem like a good sign for your plans for the future.”

~~~~

“But you know what I didn’t expect is that they would *keep coming* even up until the end. You’ve got to respect the sheer suicidal bravery of clambering up that mountain of broken machine parts towards the person who’d turned their entire army into a scrap yard,” Satsuki said. She was laying on the double-wide cot in their tent, head in Ryuko’s lap, twisting her body back and forth in a rather girlish way. She just couldn’t contain the lingering excitement of that days battle, and with just Ryuko there she didn’t have to.

“You really do,” Ryuko agreed, “Crazy motherfuckers, these hardcore REVOCS types.”

“I could see the fear in their eyes, but they came at me anyway. I do hope there weren’t too many that got crushed though, because if any of them can be deprogrammed they have great things in them. Like that Itsuki fellow, you know he’s a secret agent now?” Satsuki asked.

“Damn, I had no idea. But I wouldn’t worry about that, we took, like ten *thousand* prisoners today. Mostly thanks to you. Nonon’s gonna pitch a fit when she finds out it’s so many half the troops have to stay behind just to guard them,” Ryuko chuckled. “Ah but whatever. That’s her problem.”

“Indeed. So do you think we should order dinner or head over to the mess hall? Would it make too much of a scene if you were seen there?”

“I dunno. I ain’t really that hungry yet.”

Satsuki frowned, and put a hand on Ryuko’s belly. “She is, though.”

“Sats...” Ryuko sighed, “Yeah, alright, let’s head down to the mess hall.” As Satsuki slid off her, Ryuko said, “Hey, I have a question.”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think we’d fight more if we weren’t rich? Like, bickering about little things. Would that be bad?”

Satsuki stopped, touching fingers to her chin as she thought. “Well, I suppose not having maids to pick up after you might be annoying. And I wonder which one of us would be less responsible with money, because I like to think that I’m a modest person all things considered but then you’ve actually experienced poverty before. One of us would be, and it would get on the other’s nerves,” She looked a bit hesitant about that. Suggesting that they *would* argue seemed like it might hurt Ryuko’s feelings – damage Ryuko’s belief in her unconditional love. “I think squabbles like that are just part of working things out. I mean look at Nonon and Uzu. Does that seem like a fair assessment to you?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. I was thinking the same kinda thing,” Ryuko smiled.

“So what prompted that, if I may ask?”

Ryuko shrugged, “Oh, nothing much. I was just thinking about how our lives could be different under different circumstances.”

Satsuki took her hand as she stood up and said, “Well, that is always fun, but don’t worry. The most important things in our life don’t change that easily.” She smiled tenderly and said, “You’re the mother of my child, Ryuko. I could *never* stay mad at you, and you know I’ve tried.”

Ryuko pulled a petulant frown, “Oh, is that all I am to you? A baby-making machine?”

“Now you see, that is a very ‘hungry Ryuko’ response,” Satsuki giggled, “You get so cranky when you’re hungry.”

“Ah shit, do I really?”

“You do. Now let’s go, I hear their making ribs and roast duck tonight. To celebrate today’s victory.”

“Ribs? Oh hell yeah, music to my ears.”

## The Fate of the Matoi Fortune: 2

June 2068

~~~~~

The weekly rotation of kamui and their wearers to and from the front lines was a very loose, casual thing. Generally speaking, at least half their full strength had to be in the general area of the “regular” army, and then a couple others out on side missions while the remaining two or three got some R&R. And this was just what everyone had decided made sense for the time being, while the battle was concentrated in the heartland of China. It was an open question whether the war would continue to the outlying REVOCS invasions into the Americas and Siberia or if the cult’s entire structure would just collapse on itself before then. But if it did, the way everyone was deployed would probably change again. Keep it casual, let everyone mostly pick where they spent their time, and the whole thing started to feel more like an ordinary job than anyone could have expected.

This time, it so happened that Ryuko and Satsuki and Rei headed back to Japan at about the same time. Ryuko and Satsuki stayed a little longer to make sure the supply lines for the siege of Beijing were set up the way Nonon wanted (it was her turn to oversee operations next), and then they, along with Aikuro and Mataro, headed for home. Uzu stayed on because he was on a roll and hoping for a rematch with Ranketsu, but otherwise basically the entire rest of the kamui corps switched places. And on the day after they’d gotten back Ryuko invited Rei over to the mansion. Not for just the usual casual dinner party, but to talk about something important.

“What do you suppose it could be?” Rei wondered to Furashada. They were waiting for Ryuko out by the lake, on a lounge chair shaded by a huge old oak. “I suppose the real question is whether it’s something Satsuki came up with, or Ryuko.”

*[Very true. Because if it’s Satsuki then it’s something she got Ryuko interested in as well, since she’s the one who asked us here. Which means it’s probably some sort of revolutionary new idea, not just boring details work,] Furashada assessed. [But if it’s something Ryuko came up with, well it **could** be good.]*

“Or more like it has the kernel of a good idea in there, but we have to take over to make it something that works. Like that Korea thing,” Rei said.

*[Oh, sure, perfect example. She was right that reparations between the former North and South Koreas had to be made, but ‘just give each of them half’?]*

Rei laughed, “Pretty clear she didn’t give it more than *five* minutes of thought. Although her solution to if they didn’t like it of ‘they can take it up with me’... you have to wonder if she thinks that makes her sound more down-to-earth or if she really does mean to use her intimidation like that.”

*[Well, ask Satsuki to take it up with her. It’s gotta be the former, right?]*

“Or maybe she just doesn’t realize how bad the latter is,” Rei shrugged, then looked up and said, “Ah, here they come.”

Ryuko and Satsuki came along together from one of the gates to the gardens, hands clasped together, laughing at a whispered joke only for them. Immediately on seeing them Rei felt a pang in her chest. Didn't they just look so gorgeous and *right* together, especially without all the grandeur reserved for war and ceremonies? Rei understood perfectly how people who saw them from afar mistook them for gods. This is what a modern god would look like, bewitching in their simple authenticity.

*[Hey...]* Furushada said softly as he detected it, *[Just because you've come to terms with you and Ryuko being finished doesn't mean you have to feel okay seeing their affection.]*

"It's not *quite* that," Rei said, which was the truth. *They just look so **right** together. One look and you can tell how much they love each other; how happy they are to be starting a family together. They are aspirational, not because I want to be there next to Ryuko but because somewhere out there in the billions of people in the world there must be someone I would look right beside. Will I ever have a chance at finding them?* That whole starting a family thing was something that when Rei first heard they were expecting she thought she might become jealous of. But the more she thought about it the more it became a scary thought instead. That was going to be a whole child, a whole, *immortal* child. She was still far too young for that, and there was still way too much to do!

"Hey!" Ryuko called with a big wide sheepish grin on her face, "Sorry to keep you waiting! We were just – Mataro had just gotten back, and he wanted to show us some new moves he'd picked up. You know how they are; they never wait."

"Nah, c'mon, you know waiting around here is just as good as killing my afternoon at home. The snacks they brought out were really good by the way, especially the fried plantains – never tried those before."

"Oh, then take some home with you!" Ryuko said enthusiastically, "I looked into it and turns out they shipped them all the way from *Cuba*, just for me. Which is, like, ridiculous. No more of that, so I'm giving them away."

Satsuki put a hand to the side of her mouth as though Ryuko couldn't see and mouthed the word "cravings", which made that make a whole lot more sense.

"Ah. Well then maybe I will, thanks."

Ryuko pulled up a couple more chairs and they sat down, then Rei said, "So how'd things go handing the reins over to Nonon?"

"Oh, fine, she was mostly just happy to get back to Uzu. She didn't *say* that, obviously. But still. And the siege has moved to focus on the Beijing city center. It's going to be a mess, there are so many enslaved people in the city and if they start executing them it will become... I don't even want to think about it," Satsuki said

"A bloodbath, huh. Fucking bastards," Ryuko spat.

"And we just sent Mataro home, so sneaking in and slaying the leaders won't be so easy. Nonon's plan is to goad them out and kill the main force in open battle in the suburbs."

Satsuki nodded and said, "She briefed me on that. I think it will work."



“Yeah, I mean I gotta be honest you guys say REVOCS has some tactical chops, but seems to me like the whole ‘our god is dead so all we can do is suicidally charge’ thing is startin’ to get to them,” Ryuko said

“I agreed they are getting desperate,” Rei agreed. “We’re winning. A month ago, I would have felt like I was going to jinx it but now I don’t think anyone can argue about that. Just in sheer numbers, the accounted-for losses on their side are in the millions so that’s like, probably almost half of their forces *gone*.”

“And that’s really unusual,” Satsuki explained to Ryuko. “In basically every war across history most soldiers on the losing side end up fleeing, instead of killed or captured. And yes, this is all thanks to the kamui. We’ve made all of military history up until this point obsolete.”

“God-damn, that’s awesome,” Ryuko chuckled.

“But now, what am I here for today?” Rei cordially got down to business.

“Right. So, um, this is something I’ve been thinking about a bit. And it’s really more a thing for Satsuki and I to talk about, personally. Only it’ll wind up affecting the government too, so I figured I needed to include you now before we decided on anything or you’d just get mad later.”

“Thanks for your consideration.”

“Makes sense,” Satsuki agreed.

Ryuko smiled, totally confident in her plan, “It’s really simple, actually. I’m going to give away all our money to the League government.”

The look on Satsuki and Rei’s faces was simply stunned.

“Ryuko-“

“-No, no wait, it’s not as crazy as it sounds,” Ryuko noticed how Satsuki and Rei were reeling from the insanity of what she’d suggested, but knew if she stopped now, she’d lose all confidence. They shot her ideas down far too often, far too automatically to let it happen again, not when the idea was actually good. *It’s the one thing I can do. The one thing to do that would make me worthy of being called queen, that will make everyone’s lives better. And there’s no way Rei can say it makes me a tyrant to do it too.*

She explained, “We’ll transfer it all over to the main treasury. Stocks too. All the functions of the Kiryuin Foundation can just be absorbed into the government, and they can elect a new leader for it to replace me. And you can cut taxes and everything, people will love it. Sats and I can take a salary, same as the kamui corps does. I calculated it too, the amount of money it takes to run this place and keep the neighborhood tidy, what it takes to run the old manor-museum and Sats’ cottage over there, and Mataro’s penthouse too. Then add in a bit for presents and other random stuff, and a bit extra for buying things for Nozomi and for her education, all told I think fifty million yen a year is fair. ‘S less than your salary, Rei, I think’s pretty reasonable,” Ryuko finished proudly. The magnitude of difference between several trillion and fifty million had not exactly settled on her yet. Though if it had, she would probably have been even more appalled.

Rei just stammered, not even sure where to start. But Satsuki quietly said, “... You really want to give all our money away?”

And that was when Ryuko realized there was a problem.

“You don’t like it?” She asked hesitantly. And then, more insistently, “Why not?”

“Well, it’s not that I don’t like it, actually I think it’s a very noble idea but-,”

“-But then there’s nothing else to think about! It’s the only way to stop it from just sitting there, making more money faster than we can even spend it!” *Oh god, it’s gonna be another one of these lectures. The ‘good idea, but it’d never work’ ones, talking down to me about how the world works like I’m five.* Ryuko’s mind swiftly jumped to this conclusion – she’d been so tense about whether they would approve, and she barely realized it. But more than that, she saw the signs of true fear in Satsuki’s eyes. *She’s been mega-rich all her life, could it be she can’t conceive of living without that? Could it be that she’s still got that horrible elitist worldview buried deep in there? How could she do that, how could **my** Satsuki still think like that? And Rei too, it wasn’t hard to tell that she was beside herself, She claims she’s a socialist but when hasn’t she had the silver spoon too? She likes to be in charge too much to not have that wealth hoarding instinct. They’re always so good at spotting my flaws I wasn’t aware of; don’t they know I can do it too?*

“No, just – Ryuko listen. If you do this it will start a *war*,” Satsuki stated in an urgent tone. “I’m serious Ryuko, we own more than fifty-percent of shares in at least... probably around seventy American corporations I can think of off the top of my head. That means we effectively own those companies, though very passively. We *could* grind them to a halt if we wanted with just a few emails. And that’s just America, the same can be said for the other great powers and plenty of other countries besides. They can accept it because we are private citizens, not a sovereign nation.”

Ryuko cut in, “Well that’s bullshit. I’m the queen! And they already wanted us dead!”

“Yes, it is total bullshit! It’s one of those convenient lies we all tell ourselves to justify a status quo where neither side wants to provoke the other. But they won’t be able to do that if we transfer ownership over to the nation, because then a foreign country would hold the power to destroy their economy in its hands,” Satsuki explained, in a sharp tone that made it seem she was angry to be explaining something so obvious at all. “In fact, it’s the *first* thing I’d do if I wanted to start a war, especially with America!”

Ouch. Ryuko hadn’t even considered that. “Well for *God’s sake* Satsuki, that’s your fault! Who ever asked you to go and buy out all these corporations huh?”

Satsuki, face flushed, loudly retorted, “I didn’t expect this! How could I? You’ve just come up with this just now – I only managed our finances as anyone would!”

“That’s so not true, I put a lot of thought into this! I mean seriously, did we *need* to be even richer?”

“Well I hardly heard you complaining about being able to turn half an island into a complete medieval fiefdom! You know the cost for - ,” The look on Ryuko’s face was so hurt that Satsuki immediately stopped herself. *Stupid, stupid Satsuki!* She chided herself urgently. It was abruptly dawning on her that they were fighting. *She’s furious with me, and she has every right to be!* Her thoughts were panicked; there was no plan for this. “No, no I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry. I treasure that place as much as you do, you know that, I merely meant to point out – no, nevermind, I won’t-,”

“Won’t what?” Ryuko asked, and Satsuki blanched. It seemed to her that there was a frosty wave coming from Ryuko, a terrible feeling that Ryuko did not want her sitting so close

*[Ryuko!] Furashada said, [You know she doesn’t deserve you talking to her that way! You know she’s always wanted to get rid of your wealth, if not now then in the near future. That means one way or another war with the Americans will probably come eventually. Would you be upset if you realized that you had accidentally caused that?]*

Satsuki took the momentary pause of Furashada speaking and murmured, “I won’t dig myself a deeper hole, that’s all.”

That took Ryuko off guard, and the anger in her face abated a bit. “You didn’t really mean that last part, did you?”

“Of course not. I... got heated. It’s just upsetting to hear that I thought I was doing something harmless and have now put us in this difficult situation,” Satsuki said. “But we should still discuss this idea. Calmly, rationally.”

Ryuko relented, “Yeah, okay, and I hear you on the war thing. But still, it shouldn’t matter. I mean, those people are horrible, wouldn’t it be good for ordinary Americans if we beat them in a war and overthrew their emperor! I mean, they claim they were the ‘greatest democracy on Earth’ and they have an *emperor*, isn’t that so obviously fucked? And besides, they don’t have a single kamui, so they wouldn’t stand a chance even if they did try and fight. Y’know, we might as well go right from one war to another, get it done with while we’re all still young.”

Satsuki couldn’t help but frown at that one, “That just isn’t what running a war is really like. Our friends fight now because we are killing evil people. People who betrayed our species. How will you convince them when it’s just regular soldiers on the other side?”

Ryuko hadn’t considered that, either. “I... I don’t know! Then I guess I’ll just do it myself, all I’d have to do was just fly right past the army and capture the emperor and his buddies. I could end the whole thing in a couple hours, right?” *That would be enough to get them to stop, wouldn’t it? I’m sure Satsuki would say that it was more than just a couple evil men making the whole war happen, that there’s economic and cultural forces, but that can’t really be true.* “Maybe that sounds tyrannical or whatever, but that’s counterbalanced by how not-tyrannical giving away the money in the first place is.”

“But Ryuko that’s just not true!” Rei said loudly, and then in a more conciliatory tone, “I’m sorry, but it’s really, really not. You should look at it this way; the danger is for people to feel more personally loyal to you than they are to the nation, to what’s best for the people. You need to really think about how people will react to this.”

Ryuko tried. She couldn’t see what Rei was getting at, “Uh, they’ll like it. I think it will be popular. Especially with the lowered taxes. I mean, you said almost *fifteen* years where we could go entirely without taxes just with our money. So, is it bad if I’m popular? Because it’s already too late for that.”

“That is true. But the difference now is, well, the truth is that giving away your money won’t change your life in any meaningful way. For anything that costs more than fifty million yen you’ll be able to just use your powers as queen to get ahold of the funds. My point is this won’t stop you next time you want to commission a titanic building or something like that. And you know that, deep down I’m sure you do.”

“Well, sure, but-“

“- So what you’re really doing isn’t giving your money away, but merging your personal wealth with the treasury. You see the problem.” Ryuko eyes went downcast. She saw the problem alright. “But the real danger is that all of a sudden, every soldier and government employee isn’t being paid by the state, but by *you*, personally. Technically that isn’t true but in practice it would be, especially if we did freeze taxes. People aren’t stupid, they would understand that. And that would be downright imperial. Like, literally, that’s how ancient empires functioned, the emperor’s personal wealth was the national treasury and that kept the soldiers in line because nobody else could pay more.”

“It’s really that bad, is it?” Ryuko said, slumping back into her chair to let all that sink in. “Is it worse than just letting so much money sit there, not helping anyone? Didn’t you say that was monstrous or somethin’ when we talked about it? I mean, which of those options is more like Ragyo, really?”

“This would be worse. This wouldn’t be like Ragyo, it would be something new,” Rei concluded, “And even more dangerous.”

The scowl on Ryuko’s face betrayed just how ridiculous this all seemed to her. She asked Satsuki, “And that’s a no from you too?”

Satsuki legitimately didn’t know what to say. “I’m... sorry, Ryuko.”

Ryuko laughed, a short, frustrated bark, and said, “Man, what the hell is this? You go into overdrive coming up with these reasons why my idea wouldn’t work. And you’re right, I’m not stupid, I can see you’re right. Except for that all of those things will happen *anyway*. It’s just like Furashada said, we’re going to have to fight the Americans one day, they want us dead. They – they’re literally selling tanks to REVOCS I mean they just don’t even care! And Rei, I get it, basically making the who government our unofficial employees is pretty bad. But it won’t change a thing. People already think I’m a god! Every country from New Zealand to Bangladesh rose up, all at once, only because they took what I said in my coronation speech literally. So if you want to talk about personal loyalty it’s way, way too late!” Ryuko finished her rant with an exasperated sigh.

“That’s not true!” Rei protested.

“Well, whatever,” Ryuko continued stridently. “Giving away my money won’t make the situation any worse. Especially if we just didn’t tell anyone, didn’t cut taxes. There’s no problem then, right? Right?” Rei too now had nothing to say. This was a moral issue for Ryuko, and on those grounds, Rei had nothing to say. As if to hammer that home Ryuko said, “You know Sats, one day we’re gonna have to explain everything to Nozomi. And she’s not gonna get the whole dumb politics behind why I’m queen, not until she’s all grown up. To her that’s not the question, it’ll be whether I’m a good queen. How could I answer that, if we keep hoarding all the money in the world? I just want to end that *now*.”

Satsuki cleared her throat and tentatively said, “We’ll discuss it.”

“Fine. I’m going for a flight then,” Ryuko stridently declared, lifting off her chair before straightening herself out to float upright in the air. She only hung there for a moment before tearing off into the sky.

Immediately after she left Satsuki slapped a hand to her head and made an utterly exasperated “Rrgh!” noise.

There was something deeply sympathetic to seeing Satsuki in the same situation Rei had so often found herself. She laughed softly and said, “She’s really got a talent for making out to be wicked just for thinking of the practicalities, doesn’t she?”

“I feel rather wicked, honestly,” Satsuki sighed. “Well, go ahead. Point out how this reveals the contradictions between my supposedly socialist beliefs and the reality of my extremely privileged lifestyle.”

“Why would I? You clearly know.”

“Hmm,” Satsuki hummed in amusement. “It is a bit ironic though, isn’t it? I’ve always like to think I didn’t need much, that I shied away from needless extravagance, and yet…”

“... And yet?” Rei sat up, invited her to say more.

Satsuki looked up at the sky and said, “I don’t know. I just... it took me off guard when she suggested it.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

The haze of the afternoon was wafting over the lake. Even in the shade the summer heat was furnace-like, quickly sapping all energy. The drone of the cicadas washed out all distant sound. *[Are you feeling a bit guilty about the urge to call a maid to fetch you water?]* Furashada asked, amused.

Rei murmured back, “What if I am? After that talk do you not feel a bit self-conscious about our seventy-six-million-yen salary?”

Furashada shrugged and quipped, *[I’m not even two years old. I don’t know what money is.]*

“... Frightened me, actually,” Satsuki admitted to the sky. “What does that say about me?”

“I think I can admit that it frightened me too,” Rei said.

“Perhaps, but that isn’t the same. I imagine you felt frightened because you foresaw the consequences whereas I... that was a pathetic feeling. What version of Satsuki is it who is so reliant on her riches? I guess I’ve never had to find out, I’ve only ever been without them in some of the most intense moments of my life,” Again, Satsuki wasn’t really looking at Rei, but Rei had the distinct feeling that even Ryuko and Nonon would probably have gotten different versions of this outpouring of emotion. This was a candor reserved for someone who would get it, as Rei got it.

She said, “Nah, not quite. For me, I was startled because this is one of the few times where Ryuko has gotten really political. And it turns out her ideas, her visions can be more radical than I’d thought. Almost a ‘what have we unleashed’ kind of thing.”

Satsuki hum-chuckled, “Yes, but I respect that. Especially in a case like this, where she’s right.”

“Oh, that’s the worst thing about it, on any moral ground she’s absolutely right,” Rei agreed quickly and enthusiastically. “Nobody should have the kind of money you do, and we should have done

something about it a long time ago.”

“I think over the years since we left Honnouji I trained that out of myself. That ‘damn the consequences’ determination. Gotta admit, it’s a bit of a turn-on.”

Rei laughed out loud, “Phahaha! You’re a real piece of work, you know that?”

“Hmm. But you know, maybe it’s that phrase, that ‘nobody should have the kind of money you do’ that gets my hackles up. Because then it’s me that’s under attack. Usually the things Ryuko gets upset at me for are *totally* ridiculous – if I ask her to clean up, back when she was in school and I asked if she was studying – so we can work them out quickly. But this isn’t about little things like that it’s about my character. And what am I to say because yes, it is a problem and yes, I didn’t do a damn thing about it!” Satsuki finished.

“Well, I for one am not judging you. I was also aware of the problem and didn’t have a solution either,” Rei shrugged.

“Thank you, but still. If Ryuko noticed the contradiction there, what does everyone else think? What’s more I think you should be judging me. Does that visceral reaction not suggest some deep-seated attachment to the same capitalist hierarchy Ragyo used? I’m almost surprised you *didn’t* bring it up *that time*.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, stop beating yourself up about this, we have to decide what we’re going to do. Look, if you’re really upset about it why not just ask someone? Seriously, text Nonon or Shiro or someone and see if anyone resents you for holding onto the Kiryuin fortune.”

Satsuki looked interested by that idea. “Alright, if you think I should.” She sat up and took out her phone, “I’ll text Mako and Aikuro too. One person who actually experienced poverty, another who was my enemy. There! Done. Now we shall see.” She slid her phone back into a discrete pocket by the sash in her dress and said, “So, what are we going to do? I doubt you’ll be surprised but, in a vacuum,, I do rather want to do it. Almost as a personal challenge to myself. Just to prove I can.”

“Well, you’d hardly be poor afterwards. Fifty million a year is not petty change.”

“No, but Ryuko was right that most of that will be eaten up by operating expenses for our various estates. I think after that it will be about fifteen million a year. God, we might have to start a college fund for Nozomi in case she wants to go somewhere really expensive.”

“She’s gonna go to college, huh?”

“And grad school. She will have a doctorate in... oh, I don’t know, something by the time Ryuko is ready to abdicate,” Satsuki intoned, holding up a finger didactically. She was aware how imperious that sounded. “In any case, I don’t really know quite what to do.”

“Me neither. How can I weigh the amount of good freely using all that money would do against the harm it could cause? So maybe it’s best if this isn’t our decision alone,” Rei finally decided, “We’ll have The Office of The Queen submit the proposal to the League congress and let them vote on it.”

Satsuki nodded. She like the idea in general but, “If The Office of The Queen does it, they won’t even bother reading it before voting yes.”

“Hmm, true. Then I shall bring the proposal instead. I’m not... exactly universally popular.”

Satsuki chuckled, “I’ve heard.” In her position as the head of the League congress (the administrators of the entirety of The League of The Pacific) Rei was the one who had to make the sorts of tough decisions that might jilt one partisan politician or another. In just a short span she had earned a reputation as an incorruptible but rather unsympathetic ear.

“Or better yet, we could get one of our puppets to do it instead.”

“Mmm, not this time. I think that would look like a very impertinent suggestion, to take the property of *the* Ryuko Matoi. No, you’re the best one for the job.”

“Sounds like a plan then,” Rei said, but before she could relax too much Furashada murmured a disappointing truth to her. “... Of course, odds are they will approve it,” She repeated what he had said for Satsuki’s benefit.

“That’s true, oh no, that is probably true,” She put her hands over her face and said, “Gah, we really are going to go to war with America – at least – aren’t we?”

“I think maybe Ryuko was right, maybe we always were. It’s just this will be their pretense. Well, maybe she’ll be right about kamui allowing us to make a swift and bloodless end to it.”

“Sure, but then what?” Satsuki asked, “What if they wanted to join the League too? The west coast is on the Pacific, hard to say they at least wouldn’t have a right. Especially considering we’re already absorbing China, so that’s one great power already.”

“Oh God, we’re really absorbing China, aren’t we?” Rei laughed in a startled way, realizing that this was the inevitable end to the current battles on the mainland.

“I’m afraid so. Maybe the far western side will want to go free though?”

“Why would they? I’m sure they’d be happy to be ruled by ‘God-Queen Ryuko’.”

“Right. And you’d be okay if they voted for it, even considering the personal loyalty issues?” Satsuki asked.

“No, not really. But then again, would it make fighting against the “God-Queen” issues *that* much harder? I really don’t know,” Rei shrugged. “We’re fighting against the tide either way.”

Satsuki couldn’t help but agree, “In my mind the only thing to do is attempt to but as much distance between her position as a religious figure and any meaningful political action as possible. We can’t let her be seen to have a hand in this. Let it happen quietly and discretely if they vote it in.”

*Now that’s a good way to sum up what we have to do,* Rei thought, *were it so easy though.* “You’re right. It’s just a shame to be saying that now that she’s actually trying to do something of her own initiative, and it’s not a terrible idea either.”

“Well, if she keeps coming to us like this I don’t see the problem.”

“Hmm. You know, the prime minister will run out his term in about a year now.”

Satsuki looked over at her, “What are you suggesting?”

“I’ll commission some polls. See how many people think that your political stances are Ryuko’s mouthpiece compared to your own.”

It took Satsuki a moment to process this, “You want me to run for Prime Minister? Wha – that’s not at all what I was expecting.”

“Well, only if I wind up believing that people don’t see you as Ryuko’s puppet just because you’re her wife.”

“Right, because who would believe that my own wife has no influence over me?”

“Well, you are Satsuki. Incorruptible, disciplined, fearless, and *entirely* self-sufficient. At least, that’s how you appear in your public image. It might be enough, probably not but on the off-chance it is you might as well run. It wouldn’t really change how influential you are much, and it would give Ryuko an outlet without having to be public about it. And then, the end of your term could be the definitive end to your time in politics. It would be nice to close things out legitimately, right?”

“Huh...” Satsuki put a hand to her chin. Rei could see a sort of softness in her eyes. *She’s touched that I asked her, isn’t she?* “Well, I think a lot of people would see through it, or maybe have a problem with one couple running everything. But if against all odds your studies say different, I’ll... have to think about that. But thank you.”

“So then it’s decided? I’ll bring it to congress, let them vote, and then we’ll find a way to deal with the fallout?” Rei asked.

“Indeed. Let’s try to take some of Ryuko confidence with us this time. I’m sure she still thinks deep down that we are worrying over nothing,” Satsuki smiled. That was a conclusion she was sure Ryuko would be happy with. Now all that was left was making up to her for being so foolishly obstinate before.

“Cool. In that case I’m going inside for something to drink. You want anything?”

“Not particularly. Oh! Before you go though, they responded to my texts,” Satsuki said, getting up and coming over to crouch next to Rei’s chair. “Would you like to hear their responses?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, so Nonon: ‘Is this a joke? I don’t get it. And you know I hate it when you do jokes that make me feel dumb’,” Satsuki made her voice shrill and snarky as she read.”

“Heh, that’s a good Nonon,” Rei chuckled.

Satsuki beamed, “Thank you. I’ve been practicing it in my head for years but so rarely get a chance to use it. Anyway, I typed, ‘Not a joke’ and she said, and I quote, ‘Fuck no. You earned that. And fuck anyone who says otherwise.’”

“Oh. Well you see? I would say that’s her being sweet.”



“In her own way, certainly. Mako is much the same, she said ‘ ‘course not, you’re a good person’. And – this is good – Shiro just wrote, ‘There is no ethical consumption under capitalism’.”

“Hah!”

“He did follow it up though with, ‘Also, without you we wouldn’t have our lab, so I guess I’m glad you held onto it rather than letting it all vanish into the wind’. Logical as ever, you know,” Satsuki said, “Oh but hold on now, Aikuro’s is actually helpful. He says, ‘Serious answer what I was hoping you would do was make reparations and distribute the money to everyone who suffered under Kiryuin rule. So yeah I was disappointed at first. But then I thought that’s probably most of the entire world, so you might be handing out pretty tiny amounts of money. So maybe the way you use the Kiryuin Foundation to finance projects for the public good is better. Also, you financed making the kamui, so it all works out in the end’.”

Rei said, “Oh wow, he’s right. That is absolutely what we should have done. Too late now, and he probably didn’t think about how much paperwork it would take,” That got a huff of laughter from Satsuki. “But he is right, that would have been the most appropriate thing to do.”

“But wait, then he also says, ‘Not serious though if you’re looking to get rid of some of it Mataro and Yuda and I were thinking about upgrading the penthouse hang-out space. Get a big fish tank, some sharks, new couches, redo the patio, maybe one of those cool drop-off pools with the glass side? Could be fun’. So, it’s not exactly a hill he’s going to die on,” Satsuki said.

“Mataro must think he’s so cool, chilling with the playboy crew,” Rei added.

“According to Ryuko it’s practically all he’s ever wanted.” Satsuki stood to go, and as Rei also got up her phone buzzed. Satsuki checked in and, chuckling to herself, said, “Oh, and Houka just texted me too. Get this: ‘Before you bother texting anyone else, I’ve collated a list of everyone in our circle’s most recent comments on wealth and the Kiryuin fortune specifically. Find it in the attached file’.”

Rei was stunned, “... I don’t think he really gets the purpose of the exercise.”

~~~~~

By the time Ryuko returned home later that evening, she had cooled down considerably. Maybe her idea really was as crazy as Satsuki and Rei thought. She didn’t think so, but then how could she know? She landed on the balcony determined not to think too hard about it anymore. Whatever happened, happened.

She opened the balcony doors into her bedroom, only to come face to face with a huge vase of flowers stacked on the small table at the foot of the bed. It was packed high and swirling with bold colors – deep purple orchids and crimson roses and bundles of grape shaped blue hyacinths. Ryuko recognized all of them from the garden, and as she strolled over to get a better look at them, she noticed that the snips on their stems were fresh, still dripping dew. On the vase a small paper tag hung that simply read, *\*I’m sorry\**.

“Heh, you picked these yourself, didn’t you?” She murmured to herself – Satsuki was in the bathroom, brushing her teeth, so maybe she could hear but maybe she couldn’t. No matter, that fact was obvious to Ryuko. Satsuki’s scent was obvious to Ryuko’s nose, coating the bouquet.

Ryuko pressed her nose into it and drank in the pleasant, fresh swirling of smells from pollen and Satsuki. And she stayed there until she felt Satsuki's hands on her hips and lips on her cheek.

"You like them?"

"Totally. This's really sweet of you Sats," Ryuko said softly. She swayed with the gentle motion of Satsuki's hands and turned to look at her.

"Bitches love flowers," Satsuki said with a smug smile.

Ryuko grinned in recognition – that was one of her lines. "You just think you're so fuckin' clever, don't you?"

"*I do*," Satsuki practically purred.

"So what's this about then, huh?" Ryuko had picked up the tag and held it to Satsuki's face. "What could you have to be sorry about then, huh?" She asked coyly.

Satsuki just smiled and kissed her again, "I said I could never stay mad at you, and I meant it. The tense manner in which you left, that was entirely my fault."

Ryuko felt profoundly relieved. *Oh thank god, Satsuki and I are on the same side again. Does this mean she's okay with giving away our money? No, it doesn't matter.* "Well, you don't have to go *that* far. I got pissed too fast, I don't know... I guess I wasn't ready for pushback."

"No, no you have nothing to apologize for. Was not the very first thing that I said that it was a noble idea?" Satsuki lifted Ryuko's chin, ostensibly to make her look at her in the eyes only Ryuko already was. Really it was just for effect, and because she liked the way Ryuko's mouth hung slightly open like that. "No, I've felt horrible since before you left, even. It was like this moment of realization that I was starting an argument, and for a cause I didn't even believe in. I still have the instincts of a Kiryuin heiress buried down there," She touched a hand to her heart. "Can you forgive me for that?"

It took Ryuko a second, but she said, "... Yeah. I think I already kind of knew that." Satsuki still didn't look so convinced so Ryuko said, "Aw, c'mere you big baby," and led her to flop next to her on the bed. "I don't blame you, y'know, old habits die hard.

"That and it didn't feel very good to realize I'd given half the world a pretext for war if they want one," Satsuki hummed.

"Oh yeah, that too. Furashada explained that part to me though. So, uh," Ryuko said, "What's all this mean, then?"

"It means I want the money gone too. For me. I'll purge my attachment to it."

"Really!" Ryuko sounded maybe too excited because Satsuki paused.

"Er, what will really happen, we decided, is that we'll have the League congress vote on it. That way it's out of our hands."

That only seemed right to Ryuko. Yes, that is what they should've done all along. "That's good. Do you think they'll vote for it?"

“Oh, probably. I’d say *very* good odds.”

“Hah! Yeah, the moment they read that big fuckin’ number it’ll just be a ‘*ka-ching!*’ noise in all their heads,” Ryuko laughed.

“And also, we thought it would be best if it seemed like Rei had suggested it,” Satsuki said. That seemed to confuse Ryuko but the way she tilted her head, so Satsuki said, “In fact, we were saying that it would be best if you avoided taking public political stances as much as possible. Not to say you shouldn’t try to do some good and be a good leader when you can but do it the way you did today instead of publicly. If people stop seeing you as a political figure, even if they still think of you as a religious one eventually the conflict of personal loyalty should be reduced.”

“That’s what you like to think,” Ryuko said sarcastically.

“It is. We’ll figure it out, Ryuko, that’s the point.”

“And you’re going to figure out that whole war thing too?” Ryuko asked and did seriously want to know. *My actions could start a war*, was not something Ryuko had ever considered before today.

“We will. Sometimes Rei and I get too caught up in all the little practicalities. We forget who we are, we forget that we should be bold, break conventions, and dare the world to resist,” Satsuki felt proud at that. The days of their final battle against Ragyo felt so far away, but the memory of the burning determination they had felt in their hearts did not die so quickly. “And so, if the American oligarchs or their counterparts in whatever country feel like testing us, we will remind those ingrates the reason why *we’re* the ones who saved the world.”

Ryuko grinned, exuberantly kissing Satsuki again. “Thanks. You’re so… thanks so much for this.”

“And thank you for your cooperation as well,” Satsuki said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ryuko asked

“Only that if you’d really wanted you could’ve just ordered us to do it. I was *slightly* concerned that you were angry enough with me to do that.”

“What?” Ryuko scooted up to prop herself on an elbow, “I’d never do something like that! Part of being married means everything we own is *ours*. I know bringing Rei in made it into a politics thing, but to me this was always about us and our relationship.”

“I know. And that is very sweet, but you should know too,” Satsuki ran a hand through Ryuko’s hair, along her cheek, “If you gave me an order as queen, I will follow it. Not just because I’m supposed to but… I’d be happy to.”

“Pssh, like that’d ever happen. When it’s comes to you and me Sats, you know you don’t have to do that. We know this whole queen thing’s a sham, right? It’s just the two of us, and we’re equals,” Ryuko leaned into her hand and dropped down, snuggling around Satsuki’s side and swiftly morphing her clothes to simple pajamas as she did.

“Well, no couple is ever perfectly equal. That’s just not how it works.”

“Fine then, if that’s so then I must be the, uh, the submissive one,” Ryuko didn’t really like to get that word out but she could think of no other phrase. “I mean, I basically just follow you around to all your meetings and stuff all day.”

Satsuki hummed, “Oh? I was just about to say the exact opposite. Because that all is just work. When have I ever left a single wish of yours unfulfilled at home?” Satsuki smirked, “And besides, who here knows how to cook?”

“I’m working on it, shut up!” Ryuko playfully shoved Satsuki’s shoulder. But then they both had a good laugh and Ryuko said, “Gee, looks like maybe we are pretty equal, huh?”

“If us both feeling on some level subservient to the other is your standard, then maybe,” Satsuki chuckled.

“Yeah, but don’t get it twisted. If you’re gonna try and say I’m ‘the man of the family’ just because I have higher rank,” She took Satsuki’s hand and guided it to her belly, “Just, y’know, here’s your reminder about that.”

“Hmm, and I’ll remind you that what I said is true. If you were to command me, I don’t think I’d be able to resist,” Satsuki said in a low, sultry voice. She admiringly rubbed her fingers on Ryuko’s hips, trying to draw her in nearer.

Ryuko just laughed loudly though, “Hah! Well now you’re just lying. You hate being told what to do.”

“Ryuko,” Satsuki whispered, “I’m trying to say you could command me to do something sexy for you.”

Ryuko’s face lit up, “*Oh*. But we haven’t even had dinner yet!”

“We can just call it up at any time. *Please* Ryuko, I missed you today,” Satsuki said between pressing kisses into Ryuko’s neck. “Now, what does her majesty command?”

“Welllll... You know, after today what I think I’d really like is to unwind in front of the TV. But I mean like, *really* unwind.” Satsuki got the drift. “And you, ‘my humble servant’, will play a key role in that.”

“But of course my liege, I shall satisfy your every desire,” Satsuki stood, scooping Ryuko in her arms and carrying her off to the upholstered indent in the floor directly in front of the TV. As they passed by the flower vase Ryuko pulled an appallingly nimble move and leaned back to snatch a rose off the bouquet in her teeth. She looked up at Satsuki with a goofy wiggle of her eyebrows and as much of a grin as she could manage.

“You’re impossible,” Satsuki said as she flopped Ryuko down among the pillows. It took Ryuko a moment to turn on the TV and set it to play a show with the volume set to a faint murmur. It was some high-production-value drama about crime lords in the slums of Korea during the great unrest of the late 20s – Satsuki had never fully watched it and Ryuko had seen it more than once already, so she put it on merely for the ‘vibes’, as Ryuko described it. “We do have the TV on while we have sex often, don’t we?” Satsuki observed, “Something about it is very homey to me.”

She wasted no time shedding her clothes, which vanished into nothing before they hit the ground. Then onto Ryuko, who vanished her pajama pants so Satsuki could straddle her on the

bare skin of her thighs. Satsuki undid the buttons on her shirt but stopped there. Ryuko was, well not unwilling, but not quite ready. Usually at this time Ryuko would be leaning into her with yearning.

“Sats?”

“Hmm?”

“I don’t have to command you to fuck me though, right?” Ryuko asked hesitantly.

“What on Earth do you mean Ryuko?” Satsuki asked.

“Well, it’s just... I dunno, since I started showing – like, really showing – I kinda feel like we haven’t really had late nights like we usually do,” Ryuko said, looking away with her eyes downcast in embarrassment.

*Oh dear, she’s afraid that I don’t find her attractive anymore now that she’s pregnant! Or is it that I think she’s too fragile for a long night with lots of rounds? Either way, she couldn’t be more wrong. I must banish that idea from her mind.* Satsuki lowered herself further, entwining her legs with Ryuko’s. She pressed their foreheads together, but her face went completely serious. “Foolish girl. You know we’ve been on the mainland since you decided you couldn’t hide it anymore. Remember? When you were freaking out about what was the most flattering version of your royal outfit for a pregnant woman, what was I doing?”

“Well, trying to get some more sleep?”

“That’s right. I was totally exhausted from every single night for the last three weeks, so I am sorry but that was just coincidence, really. I’ve been really looking forward to getting home actually, just for this,” Satsuki said.

“Sure, but I-I mean look at me!” Ryuko retorted.

Satsuki looked at her. A bit thicker around the middle, sure, but other than that Ryuko was still Ryuko. Same perfect hourglass figure, same perfect hips, same perfect skin, same perfect chest, perfect legs, perfect... everything. And maybe to someone else that early-stage bump might be an ugly imperfection, that was Satsuki’s own child. What could be more beautiful than that?

“Here, look at me,” Satsuki put both her hands on the sides of Ryuko’s face. “I’m now speaking directly to that voice of doubt in Ryuko’s mind that tells her she’s not sexy anymore. Stop it,” Satsuki said in a tender but slightly less serious voice – she was well aware that this was pretty silly. And so was Ryuko, who giggled and grinned at Satsuki. She carried on, “You’ve made the most beautiful woman in the world doubt if her own wife wants to have sex with her. Filled her with insecurity at a time when she should be feeling nothing but joy. So stop it. All I want is to be able to enjoy this precious time without *you* nosing into my lovely wife’s brain.”

Ryuko looked greatly reassured, “You get so eloquent, you know that? What is this, Shakespeare times? Am I s’posed to swoon?”

“I would find that most endearing,” Satsuki hum-chuckled.

“Ah, but I’m sorry though. I shoulda known you’d see it different, you’re the one who wanted this after all. ‘N here I am acting like it’s some hideous deformity to be a teeny bit

chunkier, and you're probably feeling jealous. I'm sorry," Ryuko said before giving Satsuki a long, deep kiss. "My lips ain't changing though, huh?"

"No, but you misunderstand me. I really do mean that this," She ran her hands along Ryuko's abdomen, slowly enough to tantalize. *Now* she was starting to lean into it. "Physically? It's no problem for me."

"So... what? Wait, Satsuki, are you saying... you're into chunkier girls? Eh? Izzat why you're always so set on making sure I eat?" Ryuko's face suddenly shifted from sweet to downright mischievous.

Now Satsuki didn't know what to say.

"*No way!*" Ryuko laughed and poked Satsuki right in the right spot of the belly to make her laugh.

"No-ho! Stop! That's – I didn't mean it like that!" Satsuki said, pushing back and straightening up, "It's not some secret preference I never told you about, don't worry. I just like to think I cultivate a cultured appreciation for the many appeals of the female body in its various forms. Oh, act all shocked if you like, but despite my prudish demeanor I do look."

"Yeah I know you do," Ryuko pulled her back down for another kiss, "I'm just messing around. I agree too, lots of good-lookin' women out there, lots of different ways to be good lookin'."

"I'm just lucky to be married to the best, huh?"

"You're goddamn right."

"Then you know you're still better than the rest, baby or no." Satsuki's face took on a sly expression and she slowly slid down Ryuko's body. "Now, enough talk. I've got pussy to eat."

Ryuko burst out with a noisy laugh, "HaHA! Then don't let me stop you. In fact, I command you step on it!"

"Certainly," Satsuki purred from between Ryuko's legs, "You just sit back, relax. You don't have to think about anything now, I'll take care of everything."

And Satsuki was good to her word. Almost from the moment she placed her lips on the inside of Ryuko's thigh she could feel Ryuko relax, sinking into the cushions. The world around her was pure softness – the pillows, sure, but more than that the supple furnace heat of Ryuko's flesh, legs lifting to wrap across Satsuki's back. Now she had no choice but to remain here until Ryuko got *exactly* what she wanted. Satsuki kissed her way down Ryuko's thigh to her goal and she didn't need to even look to feel that Ryuko was ready now.

"Hah, all it takes is half-assed pillow talk about quote-unquote 'chubby chasing' to get you slick huh? You're easier than you look," Satsuki said, and didn't wait for a response before diving in.

"Hhah... slick... shut up," Ryuko's said, voice ragged from the initial shock of Satsuki's tongue. Satsuki worked slow and careful, long strokes, the kind that picked right up with a new burst of pleasure right when it seemed to be dying down. Satsuki pictured it like the easy, early

part of a hike. Rolling hills, peaks and valleys, slowly building in intensity. She knew exact how Ryuko was feeling now, breaths coming out long and relieved like every stroke took a great load off her chest. Later would come the labored, desperate ones, as Satsuki walked her up the final mountain. *What a fun allegory it is. Though I think being forced along a real hike would be a lot less fun.*

But the best part of it all was to listen to Ryuko's little murmurs. They started as little grunts, a tiny "Nhh" here or there. If it weren't for Satsuki sprawled over her lower body you could be forgiven for thinking she was just shifting, getting more comfortable. But Satsuki knew better; every twitch and squeak was electric to her, all the reward she needed.

That was until Ryuko's hand intruded on her world, gently rest on top of her head and ruffling through her hair. Ah. Time to get serious then.

"Nn-Gah!" Ryuko yelped as Satsuki buried her face in with just, nose practically making a dent in the soft skin of Ryuko's lower abdomen. Now she could pull out all the tricks, the delicate flicks of the tongue and the heavy-lidded, sultry looks that pierced right through to Ryuko's heart. And not a single moment to relax. The pleasure stabbed up hot and heavy through Ryuko's entire abdomen – and Satsuki knew it. Of course she did, who else but Ryuko would have taught her every trick she knew, and how else but hands on experience?

"Oh, oh shit, Sats!"

"Mmm?"

"A-Ah! That – Nn- don't hum like that!" Ryuko exclaimed as her whole body seemed to vibrate in response. Her legs involuntarily clenched harder around Satsuki, but that only inflamed Satsuki's passion. She'd keep going until she passed out, if that's what it took.

It didn't take that long. Actually, it was surprisingly sudden for Ryuko to climax and the shudder that passed through her body was so strong that her legs seized up all around Satsuki, locking in her neck and chest and lifting her for just a moment. Oh, it was nowhere near enough to hurt her, but it was so tight that Satsuki's vision went dark and her ears ringing. "Hoh!" She gasped, nearly in time with Ryuko's own panting. "Oh... hoh, I thought you were gonna crush my neck!"

"Sorry! Oh shit sorry!" Ryuko managed.

"It's okay I... kinda liked it," Satsuki admitted. And it was true, the thrill of danger mixed with sex, this was the reason why half the time she and Ryuko made love it began as something like erotic wrestling. "So what now, do you want another round, change positions, switch?" Satsuki asked.

"Shh..." Was Ryuko's sole response. She did not release the grip her legs had on Satsuki. And her hand slowly, gently guided her head back down.

Satsuki didn't need to be told. She laughed to herself. *It's not Ryuko who doesn't have to think about anything, it's me!* She realized with a sudden thrill. And no, she didn't mind. This is exactly what she'd bargained for, so she allowed herself to get sucked right back into her little universe of pillows and Ryuko's lovely softness.

The second round went much like the first. Satsuki tried to build it up even slower, more languid. It seemed Ryuko was right, she really had been starved for attention while they were on the mainland because it took less than usual to send her over the edge. And there was a moment partway through where Satsuki really thought she might have already done it – Ryuko went all tense and stiff – but then after a second, she went back to normal, and Satsuki carried on like nothing happened.

But when Satsuki came back up (this time Ryuko let her) she found Ryuko with her face buried in her hands. From between her fingers the slivers of her face were burning red.

“What?”

“Ohmygod! Ohmygod-ohmygod-Sats the fucking *maid* walked in!”

Satsuki couldn’t help but break out in incredulous laughter, “What, are you serious? Y-you’re serious! Why did you-,”

“I tried! Didn’t you tell? Couldn’t you feel me like, banging on your head? Fuuuuhuhuck!” Ryuko, despite her mortification, couldn’t help but laugh too. The image of utter shock on the maid’s face – she nearly dropped the tray with their dinner on it – was burned into Ryuko’s mind and more than the humor of that the sheer fucking *power* of it was rattling through her. Naturally her obvious reaction was to just crawl in a hole and die. But at the same time that moment of laying there with her arms spread wide and tits hanging out, Satsuki wrapped around her body, just staring down that poor little maid, *that* made her feel like a queen. Not in a good way either, but just that she was so important that she could do something like that and not be even slightly worried about getting in trouble. “*God*, what a weird feeling.”

“Hmm?”

“Being queen is fucked up. Because now she thinks that was her fault!”

Satsuki stood up and went over to the (still slightly ajar) door and as she shut it said, “Well for goodness’ sake can you say it’s not? Why didn’t she think to knock?”

“She had our dinner in her hands! Plus it’s still pretty early, you see them come in and out all the time!” Ryuko protested. “Don’t get her in trouble, Sats, it wasn’t her fault!”

Satsuki could hardly say no to that. She sighed and asked, “Was it the new girl?”

“Yes... so you see, she didn’t know, she wasn’t here more than three days before we left.”

“Oh, don’t worry Ryuko, I was never going to get her in trouble.” Satsuki came back over and flopped down next to Ryuko. “An honest mistake. Fucking crazy though.”

“Yeah if it gets you to swear I’ll say so,” Ryuko offered, throwing her arm around Satsuki’s shoulders.

Satsuki looked a bit more serious at that one, “Ryuko someone walked in while I was *going down* on you! I feel – well I don’t know, I guess we’re just lucky it was nobody we knew better. But still, I don’t understand how you’re so nonchalant about this. What did you do, anyway?”



“Honestly, I don’t even know!” Ryuko laughed. “What could I do? All I had time to do was stare at her like,” She pulled the same intense face that she’d worn for the maid. Satsuki examined it closely.

“Yes. I think I would shut the door too. Although you have to wonder...”

“What?” Ryuko asked.

“Oh, you weren’t thinking the same thing I was?” Satsuki asked coyly.

“... No, what?”

“Well just, do you suppose it’s possible that it was less of an accident than you’d think? Maybe she swings our way. It would be a rare opportunity; would you blame her for wanting a peek?”

Satsuki had meant it as a joke, but the way Ryuko’s face went red all over again, her eyes big and wide with a combination of wonder and horror, told her she really considered it. “No. Do you really think?”

Satsuki laughed, “No, no I don’t, you goof. That’d be truly crazy. And even if it was true, what would you do?”

“I dunno,” Ryuko murmured, “Ask her if she wanted to join in? She’s tiny, kinda cute.”

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? Now, that would be some truly queenly behavior,” Satsuki languidly rolled over, tracing circles with her fingertips on Ryuko’s upper chest between her breasts. “You gonna have a harem, huh?”

“Mayyybe. Can’t think what good it would do though, when I have you.”

“The harem’s just for looks, I believe,” Satsuki chuckled. “But you’re right. I don’t know if ‘modern day Cleopatra’ would be a reaaally good look.”

“What, she was gay?”

“Nah, more like she had a great assortment of servants waiting on her hand and foot,” Satsuki explained.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to have her as my role model anyway. Nasty end to that story, if the movies are like real life,” Ryuko said confidently. “Maybe I could be more like a modern Joan of Arc or somethin’.”

“... Uh, she died too. Hate to tell you.”

“Well yeah it’s history. They all died.”

“No but like. It was also a rather nasty ending.”

Ryuko frowned, “Well, at least she had a cool sword.”

“This is true.”

“Well, alright then. Which one should I try to be like then, if you’re such an expert?” Ryuko asked.

“Do you need to have a parallel in the history books? I loved the characters of history, growing up, the conquerors and all that. Nobunaga, Genghis, Charlemagne, Alexander. To be honest there’s still a part of me that wants that. That wants to be even greater than all of them. But you know something?” She planted a kiss on Ryuko’s nose, “You’ve already surpassed them all. In every way. More land, more people, but more important *you* saved the world. And in comparison to that they were just glorified warlords.”

“And I’m all yours, eh?” Ryuko smirked, “So in a way you’re even greater than that. I’m sure that’s what’s going on in that silly head a’ yours, anyway.”

“No. It’s not the same. Because I always thought that when I did it, I’d be the one who conquered properly. Who left a perfect world as my legacy. But you know it’s just not that easy. And you know too if we go to war with the Americans, we’ll win, and the survivors might want to join the league. And if we let them, well, then frankly we might as well welcome the world in,” Satsuki sighed, “And yes, before you say it I mean that as a euphemism. It would just be one war after another until it was all over. So when that time comes the one thing you absolutely cannot do is say.”

“ ‘Sure, you can join. I mean what the hell you’re already on the Pacific on one side.’ I get you Sats.”

“It’s a mess, running even what we have.”

“Yeah, and it makes for great pillow talk,” Ryuko said sarcastically. “I’m sure you’re practically dripping from it though.”

“Oh no, that’s just from when you nearly strangled me with those mighty thighs of yours. I wouldn’t... say no to another demonstration of that, by the way.”

“Damn, awakened your masochist mode tonight, eh? Guess you really were starvin’ over there on the mainland, huh?”

# Kamui Flight School Prelude

## Chapter Summary

Jesus I have completely forgotten how to write short chapters lately. If I ever knew how.

I really liked the concept for this scene which was just gonna be a little thing at the start of the real chapter (which will be about Kamui flight school) so I fleshed it out. Also a good opportunity to address some worldbuilding type questions I've been getting lately. Not all of them, yeah, but at least it should give you a better idea what ordinary people think about the events our characters live through.

None of these characters are going to be frequently recurring btw, since I got a question about that.

And as always my disclaimer is that if this reads like a wild political fever dream about what I actually think should or could happen in real life that's not my intent. This is a world which has had 40 years to change from ours even before the whole "Kill la Kill happened" part gets factored in (and before KIK it's a "darkest timeline" world too), and also I don't want to go into so much detail that it utterly breaks from the loose sense of setting that the show had.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

July 2068

~~~~~

The lands around the base of the Tanggula Mountains in central western China were hard and barren. Rolling hills of dirt and scruffy grass that couldn't grow to more than a couple centimeters in height. Windswept, bitterly cold Tibetan wasteland by winter, and now in the height of the summer a scalding, lifeless desert.

Well, lifeless except for a company of soldiers inhabiting an abandoned town. Most were inside the crumbling houses or huddling in their tents. This wasn't as uncomfortable as it might seem; the tents were pop-ups with their own climate control systems and the lieutenant's command center had a network uplink so even in this remote wasteland they could connect to the world. And there was little else to do but stay inside, beat the heat, and entertain yourself with that internet connection. The whole place would have looked abandoned if not for a gaggle of six soldiers sitting under a sheet-metal awning by the defunct gas station on the edge of town.

Ahmed was one of them, a young man with a thin, hungry looking face and big, nervous eyes. He was one of the sergeants actually; this seemingly informal group was in fact a casual briefing for the sergeants from their lieutenant. From Indonesia, he'd been with the reconquest through most of the fight for his home country, first as a supply runner then working up to a full trooper. After Krakatoa rather than watch his home be smothered by ash, he'd been one of many

who transferred right over to the next front in Korea. And on he went, further and further westward. Now that the news had just come through that Beijing had fallen, it seemed like this was as far west as he would go. Well, actually he wasn't really sure about that.

"So, explain this to me again, we're just staying put 'until further notice'?" He asked.

Across their circle, the lieutenant sat. She was no older than the rest of them, but circumstance had molded her into a hardened veteran and commanding this company whose job was guarding remote outposts was something like a retirement for her. Her name was Rinako but they all called her 'Lefty' on account of she was the 'leftenant', was lefthanded, and only had her left eye after shrapnel plucked out the right one. She took a pull from a bottle of cheap vodka and said, "Thas' right. We're just outpostting now, same as back in Pyongyang. Seems like the enemy for once decided not to go down with the ship and pulled out of Beijing in force. Trying to regroup with their remnants from other bases who're wandering around the countryside. All three of the kamui were there too. They say General Jakuzure saw past the enemy rearguard and flew ahead to attack the main convoy, but when the three of them came it was too much and she had to let them go,"

"Do they really think they'll get all the way out here though Lefty?" One of the other soldiers, Pangzai, a beefy former construction worker from North China, asked skeptically. He held out a hand and Lefty passed the bottle into his calloused fingers.

She shrugged, gesturing widely towards the surrounding mountains, "Probably not. But they're avoiding all the major cities that have garrisons so who knows how long they can go before someone stops them. I hear The Kamui are waiting until they have them in just the right spot, where retreat is impossible, before they surround and slaughter them. This valley's got mountains on all sides. Maybe it's the right spot, who knows?"

"So wait, we're *just* keeping watch for them? What do they expect us to do if we see them?" Ahmed asked, alarmed that they might be expected to hold out against an entire REVOCS army until help arrived. Even if that help was kamui it might not be enough.

"We call command and we run," Lefty answered simply.

"So then couldn't a satellite just do our job?"

Lefty's eye narrowed and she leaned forward and said, "You ask a lot of questions, *Bait*." (Bait was Ahmed's nickname, because his short and weedy stature and constantly nervous look made him look vulnerable, so the enemy often tried to kill him first. Their mistake, he was called 'Bait' for a reason).

He muttered, "Seems to me like I don't ask enough questions, since I agreed to this shitty detail with you fuckers."

Lefty's face broke into a smile and the rest of the group chuckled along. "Spoken like a man who hasn't had enough to drink! Come on, pass the bottle to Bait now you've had your fill."

Ahmed took the bottle and lifted it for a very short pull in one smooth motion. He was too young to drink when REVOCS invaded, and he'd never gotten used to the crude efficiency of "soldier vodka" – meant to get you drunk on the smallest volume of liquid. He winced against the burn in his chest as he listened to another soldier say, "I'm with Bait though. Even if someone's got to be out here, why's it have to be us? I mean, there are still *thousands* of the scum standing,

plenty for everyone. You're really gonna say it'll all be over and all we got were some skirmishes, not even one real battle?" This was another Chinese soldier, Li Jie, still hot to avenge his home and people on the REVOCS scum.

"Hah! Trust me, you don't want to be any near a *real* battle. I've only seen the one and that was more than enough," Lefty stridently asserted.

"Speaking of, where were you at Krakatoa, anyway?" Pangzai asked. Ahmed was an old hand and had already heard all about it, but neither he nor any of the rest of them were opposed to hearing about Krakatoa again.

"I was stationed on the command ship," Lefty said proudly. The others leaned in to listen, "Right beside the Young Prince. 'Course, he hadn't become Kamui yet, but I knew immediately it was him."

"Really? What was he like?"

"Oh, you just couldn't keep up with him! Just seeing him put all our minds at ease, and I knew all I had to do was guard him with my life and we'd be okay."

Lefty paused for dramatic effect and one of the other new recruits said, "Well, what happened?"

"I was right there with him when the boarding party hit. Fucking Medjay, ripping the deck apart and a whole swarm of REVOCS savage on wings, buzzing all around us. It was too much, they killed even the hardcore marines and they were about to kill us. The Prince was – well, I'm not sure what he was then but he definitely was no ordinary boy because try as they might they couldn't hit him. It was like he knew where every bullet would land before they even shot. Or maybe he was just that fast."

"What could he have been?"

"Well he's Her Majesty's brother," Pangzai offered, as though that explained everything.

"They're not blood related, moron!" He was chided by Eijiro, another of the old hands – from Japan, like Lefty. He sat next to her, fiddling with his needle gun. "He and the Princess were just ordinary people living in the slums of Honnouji who took in Ryuko when she was a drifter. And for showing her that kindness when nobody else would they attained their Kamui."

"I knew that, I know the story," Pangzai frowned, "Even so, the 'slums' of Honnouji are a hell of a lot more than any of us have seen, right?"

That got murmured agreement from everyone and it seemed like Lefty would be allowed to continue her story but then Luke said, "And that's not even how Our Lady's powers work, anyway."

And everyone clammed up for a second.

Luke was American. Or, rather, his grandparents had been American, stationed on a military base in Japan when everything back home went to shit. And they decided not to go back. But despite having never seen his ancestral country he carried it with him – he still spoke English

and before Ryuko had come along he'd been a pretty devout Christian too. One of those crazy types, who knew which specific kind there were so many.

And that put all the sergeants on edge because their Matouism came from a Buddhist origin. To them Ryuko was - as she said - a mere product of a lab experiment. But it was destiny that she, who would become the most moral and righteous of all people, would be subject to that experiment. Her powers were scientific in origin; it was her ability to master them, the enlightenment she learned in her struggles at Honnouji, that was of spiritual significance. It was simple, it was factually consistent, and importantly it offered moral instruction on how to be like Ryuko – even if you didn't have secret alien powers.

And none of them knew if Luke believed that or if he was about to spout off with something totally insane.

Ahmed had other reasons not to particularly like Luke either. For one, he could be pretty damn humorless at times. Nobody liked a grouch during a life-or-death situation. More importantly though he'd always heard those crazy Christians were totally intolerant of Muslims and sure, he'd never in his life practiced but he couldn't help what his mother had named him. And even if Luke knew that, Ahmed didn't exactly love that his supposed comrade probably wanted his extended family dead almost as much as REVOCS. Still, he was the best sniper in the company, so despite misgivings they all had to put up with the man.

Except Lefty, she was his boss, “*Anyway*, it was looking pretty bad, but the Prince didn't care. He was standing on the railing, throwing down rope ladders for the troops who were fleeing the island, and he was so totally focused on it we knew that the enemy couldn't hurt him. But we shouted ‘what should we do’ to him and he just said back, ‘don't you know we're not fighting alone?’ And he must have known because at that very moment there was a noise like a rocket and *Blam!* Down came Prince Kinagase onto the deck, right in the middle of them like a meteor!” There was an awed hush and she proudly said, “Yeah, none of you have seen a kamui close up, have you? Well in person it's just something else, really. We've all seen what Prince Kinagase looks like, of course – now he's actually blood related to the Queen.”

“Right, he's her uncle,” Ahmed said.

“Right. And with what it was like standing next to him, I don't know if an ordinary person could withstand it, being next to her when she reveals her true power. Because it's true what they say, you know, his whole body – and by the way his body, I mean it was more like the *idea* of a man because trust me, no offense, but no matter how hard any of you trained you could never look like that. Like a Greek statue come to life,” She said admiringly.

“Ho! Careful now, pop a chubby now and we're all gonna see,” Ahmed exclaimed loudly, to crude, raucous laughter from everyone.

“Oh sure, laugh if you want, but trust me if you'd been there, you'd be questioning even your notably *aggressive* heterosexuality,” Lefty shot back, to even more laughter. “But even beside that his whole body was on fire, just emanating *divine* light, seriously a halo just like on the recruitment posters. And that was when he revealed his true form... Reiketsu...” She said dramatically. “It turns out he has a power like the Medjay, to control machinery, only it was obvious that theirs is just a total imitation of what he could do. When he landed he had huge metal wings, like a jet engine, but before my eyes they just kind of sucked into his back and then just as fast a thousand metal arms with huge guns on them explode out, along with this huge metal shield.

I swear it was like an entire artillery battery plus some other shit; tank cannons, machine guns, railguns, everything. That's Reiketsu, it's this... I don't know, some kind of unbelievably huge thing, a spirit or a-a god or *something*, hiding inside that man. And it can be anything it wants to be. Anyway-anyway, as soon as every single gun was out and pointed at the REVOCS it unloads, and you know how regular guns don't work on life-fibers? Well apparently, that's not true when you have *that* many guns. I could see the moment when each and every one of them popped, they would be standing there just fine like it was just a rainstorm and then *BAM!* Bloody chunks. Then the Prince killed the Medjay with a sword, like stabbed right through it so it came out the other side, dripping. And just like that he was gone, vanished into the sky."

Lefty continued on with the longwinded (and not entirely accurate) story of guarding Mataro's back as he rescued the soldiers from their boats. She wrapped up by saying, "I remember the rocket that did this," She pointed to her glass eye – smooth sky blue with no pupil, because she thought the ones that looked like real eyes were too uncanny. "It hit the deck right next to me, blew my mask clean off. I didn't even notice I lost an eye. I was just crawling around, half numb, trying to find my mask and all I could think about was how if I didn't get it back on before the volcanic gas hit I was fucked. And then I blacked out," She finished, a bit anticlimactically. She clapped her hands on her knees then held them up apologetically, "And I came to in the hospital with gauze over half my face. I was the only one in my squad who survived."

The story had been pretty fun up until that point, but that sobered everyone up. Pangzai said, "All of them?"

"... Yup..." Lefty sighed, "I don't know. They were all alive before I went down and then... But that's how it goes. In real battle all an ordinary human is good for is to bear witness to what *they* do. And then maybe die. That's the lesson here."

Eijiro broke the silence and said, "Well, that may be, but I'd still rather if they let us get our arms reissued before they send into battle." He lifted his needle gun, one of the bigger kind that fired needles at lethal velocity, "These new needle rifles are great, but damn if they don't jam all the time with all this dust." The general mood lifted a bit as the others laughed in agreement

"That's only 'cause you don't clean it properly," Lefty chided him. He shrugged as if to say "*Well I sure don't know how to do that.*". "Ugh," Lefty said, and held her hand out. Eijiro eagerly passed his gun over and in no time at all she had it partially disassembled and was cleaning off its inner workings with the hem of her tank-top.

"Thanks Rin," Eijiro said softly, and she just hummed in acknowledgement. Everyone knew there something between them, some mutual tender feelings. Had they ever acted on it? Who knew? Ahmed couldn't understand it though, Lefty wasn't just any woman, she was a comrade! It went against the honor of the thing to try and get in her pants, or any other fellow soldier, for that matter.

"So, what's going to happen now? With Beijing back in our hands and everything," Ahmed asked the group.

"Well," Lefty started with the practical answer, "The Kamui are going to win. And if they kill the enemy kamui now then the war will basically be over right then."

"You aren't worried about how they're building more monuments in like, Siberia and the Americas and stuff? Ain't there a lot of volcanoes in the Andes, that could be bad," Eijiro asked.

“Nah. The kamui will definitely take care of the ones in Siberia. And all the rest of them, I’m sure once they realize they’re fucked they won’t last long.”

“I’ve heard the locals are fighting back against them too,” Pangzai added, “Wasn’t General Jakuzure on the news saying that she’d sold some anti-life-fiber weapons to some South American tribes?”

Ahmed agreed, “Yeah, but we all know that’s not enough to deal with three-stars if there’s more than one. Eventually the kamui will have to go there and sort it out.”

“Then they will,” Lefty concluded, “But what happens after that, well, that’s anyone’s guess.”

“I heard that General Jakuzure said China was so devastated that there wasn’t even a point restoring its independence,” Pangzai said, with enough scorn in his voice that it was obvious what he thought of that. “That they should just annex the heartland directly and let the west go its own way.”

Everyone else recoiled. “What?” Eijiro said.

“Man, I keep telling you your Timeline is not an accurate source of news!” Lefty added.

Pangzai held up his hands defensively, “That’s just what I’ve heard, all I’m saying.” Although clearly he had more on his mind than that.

“And even if it was true, Jakuzure doesn’t play any part in deciding that,” Ahmed said, “That would be on Hououmaru.”

“But... wasn’t Jakuzure the one who decided to join your country to Japan in the first place? I mean, I’m sure at the time that was the best they thought they could get away with.” That again prompted a bit of nervous shuffling.

“... Get away with?” Luke murmured under his breath.

“Actually no,” Ahmed said, “She only brought the idea to the rest of them and even then it got put to a national vote on both sides. As far as I know she was never into the idea. Now though since Hououmaru is the head of the League Congress I’m sure they’ll do exactly the same as they did for all the Coronation Revolution countries.”

“Well good! I should hope so. I think everyone knows China belongs in The League now; the old order had its chance, and now it dies along with all the other old orders. I just think – and no offense to you,” He motioned to the two Japanese soldiers in the circle, “And it doesn’t make them bad people either. But it’s just the culture they were raised in. They couldn’t help but see Japan as the natural head of The League, not one of many, so having a single country that is so much bigger and more populous just wouldn’t fit.”

Eijiro said, “You know, you say no offense but-,”

“-Who are you, to say what the kamui want?” Luke interjected.

“I’m just saying! One China with one constitution isn’t that much to ask for.”



“You’re right it isn’t, but when you say it like that it sounds like you’re speaking ill of them.”

That was enough to get Pangzai to raise his voice, “That is not what I meant, and you know it!”

“Ho! That’s enough!” Lefty shouted. “You wanna argue about this shit, run for congress your own damn selves!”

“That’s right,” Li Jie said, “There are no nationalities or peoples anymore. There’s just humans and the enemy. Myself, when my service is up, I’m going to move to Japan.” That made Pangzai give him an alarmed look, but he continued, “Yeah, fuck it. My family’s been dead since before REVOCS even, except my sister and little bro who already went over.”

“Freedom of movement,” Ahmed nodded, “That’s one of our rights in The League.”

“Yeah, about that, that with the whole ‘one constitution’ thing. I thought we already had a constitution. Since you’re apparently the expert here Bait, what’s up with that?” Li Jie asked.

“No no, see the way it works is there’s one for the whole league that does things like the basic human rights and all that. And then each country has its own constitution for its own government, just the same as there’s a league congress and then each country has their own too.”

“God, that’s so fucking complicated.”

“It’s really not.”

Lefty set down Eijiro’s gun and took a big swig from the vodka bottle. She said, “You know before the war I always thought soldiers were like, ‘Ah, we don’t care about the politics, that’s above our pay grade.’ Dead wrong though, ‘cuz trust me everywhere I’ve been it’s the same conversations. I dunno, maybe that’s new. One giant global... catastrophe and all of a sudden everyone’s got an opinion.”

“You know, when you put it like that it actually makes it sound *more* reasonable, Rin,” Eijiro chuckled. “But you know what’s funny, in all this ‘what’s Jakuzure gonna do, what’s Hououmaru gonna do’ we never talked about Queen Ryuko. I mean, you’d think it’d be her call but it’s all one level down.”

“Oh, well that’s simple,” Ahmed said, “Queen Ryuko only wants one thing – besides to live her life like anyone else, obviously – she’s going to take back the universe from the life-fibers. Said as much in her coronation speech.” Everyone nodded seriously. “And you know that even she can’t do it alone. That is why what she wants from all of us is that our children will be like her. The procedure that will make her daughter ascend as she has can be done to anyone, if they get to them when they’re young enough. So it’s too late for us, but one day every human left will be like her. And I think when that day comes it won’t matter if you’re in The League or not. All of humanity will ascend.”

“Turning them into us,” Lefty agreed, “That is what she said.”

“And because She wills it, it’s going to happen,” Luke added reverentially.

It took Ahmed a moment to respond because he hadn't at all expected Luke to agree with him, "... Yeah. And I think until then trying to guess exactly what any of them are thinking is just... you're never gonna get it right. They live in a different world from us."

Lefty's tac-pad (really just a very durable smartphone) pinged and she quickly looked at it, "Hol' up, one sec. The radar guys say there's something very fast and very small flying our way. Shows up as friendly though so don't freak out or anything."

"Huh. Probably a drone."

"Well, if it was going as fast as a drone they would've said it was a drone. So very fast means it's going-,"

She was cut off by a whizzing noise similar to that of a bullet passing by, only much louder. They all peered up, bending and leaning back in their chairs to see past their awning. The sky was split in half by a razor thin red trail, perfectly straight, stretching east to west from horizon to horizon. Not a single one of them had seen whatever left it, it had been so fast that all of a sudden it was just *there*.

Stunned silence followed, and then eventually. "Was that-"

"No way."

"Holy shit."

Lefty's tac-pad pinged again, but she was already looking at the sky and this time was able to spot something coming. It was a mere spec against the sky but the glowing orange of afterburners followed it, along with a great conical sonic boom and a smoky white jet trail. She only had an instant to see it though before it too was gone as though it had never existed, save for the trail it left in the sky next to the fading red one.

"I know that one... that's Prince Kinagase!" Lefty exclaimed. "No mistaking it, no plane can go that fast!"

"So that means the first one was..."

"Yeah... Her. In the flesh."

Now the awed hush settled and they could hear around the village more and more troopers coming out to see what was happening. They hadn't missed the show either, for a few seconds later another line of light crossed the sky too swiftly for the human eye to see. This one though was blue, bright enough to stand out even against the clear sky.

"The Princess!"

And then two more, in tandem. One aqua-green, the other burning gold.

"And Jakuzure, and Sanageyama!"

"Fuck, I guess the last battle really is on, huh?"

"It can't be! The Queen is pregnant, she can't fight!"

“Oh, what do you know about what she can or can’t-“

“-Shh! Look over the mountains!”

There was light beyond the range to the west, and suddenly it burst forth. Down the mountains, across the dusty valley, up the eastern range on the other side and gone, all at speeds that dared the eye to even try to follow. Deep purple, dark garnet-red, bold blue, glowing lavender, glittering yellow, bronzy orange, and swirling blue-green like the sea. Seven trails in all.

And then they were gone as if it had never happened.

Everyone stood there, watching and waiting with their hearts pounding. Surely something explosive would come next, wouldn’t it?

Nothing did. Wherever they were going, they saw no need to double back. Nobody knew quite what to say.

Finally, Lefty broke the silence, “Different world indeed, eh?”

## Chapter End Notes

And yeah Pangzai’s name is a little Easter egg for those who know. I leave it up to you if that’s his real name, a nickname, or what.

# Kamui Flight School

July 2068

~~~~~

Ryuko set down at the very peak of the highest snow-capped mountain in sight. She'd been carrying Satsuki, scooped up in her arms, and she wasted no time putting her down. Their feet sunk deep into the powdery snow, but the peak itself wasn't too steep – actually it was more of a ridgeline, connected to the nearest mountains and with a wide, nearly flat surface on top. They kept their balance just fine.

“I'll never get used to that, just withstanding the g-forces as though it was nothing,” Satsuki said, dusting off the hems of her dress cut from Ryuko's life-fibers. “How exhilarating! I'm sorry, by the way, I'm sure my hair got in your face.”

“Nah, 's no problem at all,” Ryuko waved her off, “My own hair gets in my face all the damn time while I fly. I barely even notice.”

“But I'd think it would all get swept back,” Satsuki said skeptically.

Ryuko giggled, “You know sometimes you're so logical you're almost innocent. No matter how much of your fancy shampoo I use there's only so much to be done with this rat's nest! Besides, there's cornering and stuff. You think it doesn't whip right in my face when I take a ninety-degree turn? And you know I turn on a dime.”

“You do, at that. Now, this is the spot, right?”

Ryuko peered around. “Should be. Don't see the box with the snacks though.”

“Maybe it got covered with snow?”

“Could be.” Ryuko looked out over the horizon. Nothing but shiny white peaks, jagged black mountain crags, and dusty valleys as far as even her eyes could see (which was pretty far, far enough to get a sense of the curvature of the Earth at this altitude). “*Wow*. It's beautiful here, isn't it?”

Satsuki said, “In a certain stark, savage way, yes.” She stood behind Ryuko, wrapping her arms around Ryuko's waist and resting her head on her shoulder. She caressed Ryuko's belly and said, “Just you, me, our child, and that big sky.”

“And Mako. Look, here she comes,” Ryuko said, pointing to a distant spec on the horizon. And all of a sudden that spec was Mako, floating next to them with a goofy grin on her face. Her upside-down face. She was floating, belly-up, right in front of their faces. An aura of self-satisfied smugness emanated from her and Tonbo. His big glowing eyes glinted with the thrill of flight.

“Hiiiya lovebirds!” Mako smirked, “Check me out! Flew the whole way here upside down!”

*[The blood is rushing to her head quite dramatically,]* Tonbo soberly reported. Soberly enough, but Ryuko knew how the two of them were on their own.

“Oh nooo, her airhead brain can’t handle that!” Ryuko took Mako’s cheeks and squeezed and stretched them, and Mako kicked ticklishly into the air, “You guys figure out how to land yet?”

“Yup! Show ‘em Tonbo!” Mako shouted, and without even a moment’s hesitation her kamui stopped levitating and dropped her with a yelp into the snow.

*[No.]*

Ryuko immediately belted out in laughter, joined by Satsuki when Mako huffed, “You did that on purpose!”

*[Noooo,]* Tonbo said, but there was no heart in that. Mako stood up and he said, *[So. This is the great central asia, huh? Realm of the khans, the eternal dividing line between west and east. Only to us it’s more like an arena. No, a playground.]*

“Oh, how poetic.”

“Ryuko! Leave him alone!” Mako exclaimed, “This’s as far from home as he’s ever been, it’s all new to him!”

“I’m not making fun! I’m sorry!” Ryuko said, mortified that she could have been interpreted that way. “He’s right, this place is like a playground to us. Don’t you just want to go dive down that gorge over there? Skim up the side ‘a that cliff?”

“It’s all so far away! Makes my eyes feel weird, like from the distance,” Mako said, rubbing her eyes. “Makes me wish I had sunglasses too, but they’d’ve just blown right off my face.” Tonbo, as though trying to help, bent the tips of his hovering, semitransparent leaf-shaped eyes in front of her face. She laughed, “Tonbo no! They’re too bright it doesn’t help!”

Tsumugu and Reiketsu appeared on the horizon then and approached much more noisily and obviously than Mako did. They banked low around the slope of the mountain, burning away the snow with the intense heat of jet engine afterburners. They stopped at the peak, jet wings folding and contracting until Tsumugu was standing next to them on rock that was now barren and damp from melt.

*~[Hey guys. Scenic trip here, huh?]*~ Reiketsu greeted them all. Even though she claimed it was too hard to learn how to use a “Kamui Microphone”, here she was wearing one. After seeing how easily Wakaiketsu picked it up a number of the other kamui were trying to learn to use them too. Not all of them though, Saiban, Tonbo and Tekketsu still insisted they had no use for it.

“What’s up guys,” Ryuko said

“You have any water?” Tsumugu asked. “I have two canteens, but I finished them both on the flight. Which is how I planned it, but still.”

“Oh yeah, and snacks!” Mako added, “You said you set us up to have some snacks, didn’t you?”

“Right, I did,” Ryuko said, peering around. She lifted off the ground and floated around, peering down the craggy slopes. “I brought up a whole box of stuff for us the other day and... Oh look, there it is.” They all looked and saw a bit further down a tough, featureless black metal box, caught in a crag between two boulders. “Musta fallen.”

She floated up to get it, but Satsuki lightly brushed her hand and said, “No love, let me.” She leapt nimbly down the mountain and hauled the van-sized box up to the peak, where she rested it on the flattest available surface. She cracked the lid and a thick cloud of frosty steam rose from it, revealing cylindrical metal canteens of water (tons of them, more than enough for everyone to have a whole gallon), some bags of various energy rich snacks like fruit and nuts and protein bars, and in the back some frozen meat and fish, a bundle of liquor and little packets of seasoning and side dishes, and a portable stovetop for dinner later.

“See?” Ryuko said proudly, “I was prepared after all. Still cold too.”

“Lifesaver.”

“Woo-hoo! Thanks Ryuko!” Tsumugu and Mako were quickly rifling through the box, helping themselves to whatever they wanted. Mako held a peach up and tilted her eyebrows offeringly at Ryuko. She couldn’t ask if she wanted it because she’d already sunk her teeth into one. “Oh, yes please,” Ryuko said, and Mako tossed her one and then for good measure threw one to Satsuki too.

“So, Ryuko,” Mako said after she’d finished a bite of her peach, “You gonna tell me what we’re doing here anyway?”

“Sshh,” Ryuko replied, “Don’t worry about it! The others ain’t far behind. You can wait til they’re all here, right?”

~~~~

The others did indeed arrive in no time at all. Uzu and Nonon landed alongside them and took their water before even saying hello. And then the rest came, skipping up the mountain weightlessly. Aikuro was in the lead, then Rei and Mataro neck and neck, then Ira and Houka and Shiro and Yuda all bringing up the rear in a big jostling pack.

“Booyah!” Aikuro crowed as he vaulted up to the peak. Tsumugu gave him a high five as he landed, “Told you we could do it!”

Mataro huffed and puffed as he skidding to a halt next to them. *~[Lanky bastard!]*~ Wakaiketsu said, *~[You’re lucky Mataro had a big breakfast, if he hadn’t gotten that stitch in his stomach I would have left you in the dust!]*~

“Ah, well that’s the difference between us, isn’t it? That’s not skill, that’s experience.”

“Oh, shut up,” Mataro waved him off. “We’ll see who’s laughing later when you’re starving and I’m still doing jussst fine!”

“But that’s where you’re wrong,” Houka lightly hopped up past them, “Ryuko brought snacks!” Mataro deflated a bit, but the rest of the group happily took plenty of food and water to restore their energy after the run all the way from Beijing.

Ryuko watched with a satisfied smile and said to Satsuki, “ ‘S kinda like a picnic, huh?’”

“You’re thinking we should arrange little outings like this more often?” Satsuki replied, “Head out to the wasteland to flex your power?”

“I was thinkin’ maybe Antarctica next,” Ryuko said with a smile. And then, to Nonon, “So, ready to get this show on the road?”

“Sure.” Nonon leapt up onto the highest boulder and shouted, “Alright gang! I bet you’re wondering why we came out here today. Or, actually no, I’m sure you know it’s a training exercise. But I never told you what kind, did I?” The others stood or crouched around in a rough ring with Ryuko and Nonon in the center, casually finishing their refreshments. They shrugged; it seemed fairly obvious that they were going to use these barren mountains as a large-scale arena. Well, maybe it was, but then why bring non-combatants like Ryuko and Mako along. Just to watch?

“It’s flight school!” Ryuko beamed.

That got everyone confused. “... uh.”

“Fight school?”

“You heard her!” Nonon barked, “The mission for today is for each of you kamui to – at least try to – develop a flight capable form.” Everyone’s faces brightened with understanding – this was much more unique than what they’d expected. Who wouldn’t want to fly? Only a few of the kamui had evolved forms capable of flight, maybe there was some trick they’d figured out for the rest of em. “Let me break it down though because there’s a few reasons why this’s something long overdue. For one – and this is really the most important one – it’s going to really improve all your lives.”

Ryuko agreed, “Like, seriously. Flying is like, the coolest thing ever.”

“Right, and its going to revolutionize the way you fight too, you’ll see. I mean, it’s just a blast in every way, that’s obvious. But besides that, we’re as most of you know entering a phase of the war where REVOCS is in full retreat. Now what *I* want to do is keep tabs on them, redirect them away from centers of population, and try and get them to lead us back to their base. So, if we can get some of you up in the air we can harry them more efficiently, and that would be good. And then besides all that, I mean look there’s the sort of scientific question. Don’t tell me you guys aren’t curious what it takes for a kamui to evolve a new form.”

Houka nudged Shiro and said, “As it happens, yes we are.”

Misaki carried on his idea, *~[Because so far, we’ve only observed kamui developing new forms in battle or otherwise under extreme duress. Saiban got his first not long after you guys dropped into Indonesia, then there was Krakatoa, and then Tekketsu’s Kyojin form in Korea. Oh, and of course the time Senketsu evolved three forms in just one day of fighting.]~* The kamui felt awed at that – they usually did when it came to Senketsu. The fact that none of them had ever met him only amplified the sense of mystery surrounding the “founding father” of their race. Whoever he was, he must have been incredibly powerful and it gave them all chills to think that somewhere out there he was watching, amassing great power, still fighting for their planet even after death.

“Yeah, and then he went berserk,” Aikuro chuckled. “So don’t get too carried away. At the time we thought that he was taking over Ryuko’s mind, but we all know it went the other way around; Ryuko’s boiling blood was what kept amping *him* up.”

“Dead right,” Ryuko nodded, “Which is why this ain’t just regular daily training we could do back home. If you want to get a new form, you’ll have to both be in total sync like it was really ‘extreme duress’ or whatever. Just, y’know, without the life-threatening danger and all that. That’s a skill you’ll all need too, right? I mean, we can’t rely on everyone getting into a big fight in just the right state of mind to figure out how to transform.”

“Yeah, and not just because we’re gonna wipe REVOCS off the map in... what, four months?” Nonon asked.

Ryuko shrugged, “I dunno.”

“Well, you should!” Nonon derailed herself in exasperation.

Satsuki said, “Yes, it is about four months until the ‘promised day’.”

“Oh! Right, four months until I can get in the action if you guys don’t finish things before then. No pressure though.”

“Four months – at most – until REVOCS is toast. But that’s not the most important part. The most important part is that considering that the three of you,” Nonon motioned to Tonbo, Wakaiketsu, and Rama, “Have been getting along with life just fine we’re probably going to go ahead with expanding the kamui corps.” That got raised eyebrows, some murmurs.

“Huh.”

“First I heard about it.”

“Well, makes sense though. About time really.”

“Right,” Nonon said, “This’s the first you’re hearing about it because that is exactly as far along on that plan as anyone has gotten. But it’s the way Ryuko wants it, so it’s how it’s gonna be. And when we have the first meeting about recruitment eventually, it’ll be all of us and nobody else, of course. But these new kamui, we should all hope they won’t have to see war; they’ll be non-combat, like Tonbo. We gotta know what we can expect for them. What’s it gonna mean to live an ordinary life for a kamui who’s not at war? Will attaining new forms be some kind of rite of passage for them? Maybe it’s too inconsistent for something like that?”

*[We have to know more about ourselves,]* Saiban continued her train of thought, *[About what we’re capable of.]*

And then back to Ryuko to wrap up the speech, “That’s right. But hey at least today we’re gonna get to do that the fun way, instead of in the lab getting poked with weird scanners and shit. And then at the end of the day we grill up some dinner, watch the sun go down over the mountains, and then we all fly back to Beijing in perfect formation!”

“That doesn’t sound very likely,” Shiro spoke up. He met Ryuko’s eyes with an indifferent shrug, “Don’t get me wrong, I think this is the right approach and all but think about



how various the circumstances were under which you unlocked your various flight abilities. It seems unlikely that we'll *all* manage it today."

"Well, not with that kind of attitude you won't," Ryuko replied, but out of the corner of her mouth she smirked at Uzu. He, of course, was in on her and Nonon's plan for today's training exercise Nonon couldn't keep it secret from him.

"Looks like we got us a volunteer," Uzu said, and before Shiro even had time to say "huh?" he leapt up and grabbed Shiro by both wrists. "Sorry buddy."

"Oh no..." Shiro groaned. Uzu rocked back on his heels and whipped around, whirling in a circle like a top.

"It's time to leave the nest, baby bird! Now fly!" Uzu shouted with a mischievous grin as he let go of Shiro's wrists and hurled him with all his considerable might. He shot off like a bullet, the split, tendrilous ends of his cape rippling through the air behind him. He passed over a valley, a range, but then something pale grey-white appeared from the clouds and intercepted his route. He clung to the top, barely visible from that distance, but as the object came closer, they could all see that it was clearly an autonomous drone. And it had a speaker on it.

*~[You see Shiro might not be able to fly, but I can!]*~ Izanami's voice boomed out as they zoomed past.

"That's cheating!" Nonon shouted, "Get back here!"

*~[You have to catch us first!]*~ Izanami shouted back but then Nonon surged forward and they realized just how much faster than a mere mortal aircraft a kamui in flight was *~[Oh shit!]*~

And so the day's training began with Shiro plunging down to earth along with a drone turned to scrap metal by Nonon's slender fist.

~~~~~

Having a whole mission briefing and everything might have made it seem like this training exercise was going to turn into something a little more structured than a free-for-all, but a free-for-all was exactly what it was. Kamui dashing in every direction, glowing exhaust trails weaving together, crashing into each other with mighty shockwaves, running parallel as they traded blows. From a distance, it must have looked and sounded like a truly earth-shattering battle.

And it's not like it wasn't. At one point Tsumugu decked Aikuro into a mountain so hard that the entire side of it came crashing down on top of him. Of course, he was fine, and it was no effort at all for Nekketsu to produce a shockwave to free them. With a deafening boom those tumbling boulders, truck-sized chunks of raw mountain rocks, and thousands of tons of gravel and rubble all went flying back into the air like fireworks.

"Gah, that never gets old," Aikuro said, clenching his fists up as the power surged through them. Then he leapt, long slender legs propelling him high into the air to snag a perfectly sharpened chunk of rock from amidst the falling debris. "Heads up!" He shouted as he landed neatly on a pillar of broken stone and threw his new weapon, itself the size of a small house, at Tsumugu. It whistled through the air like a football. At first, it seemed destined to miss Tsumugu. Such a small target in such a huge sky, so far away that gauging the distance was almost impossible.

Almost. Aikuro had put just the perfect spin on it so that in the last moment it careened to the right and slammed right into his target. The mere machinery that Reiketsu used to construct her jet engines and wings was shorn off in a fiery explosion, and Tsumugu stuttered and dropped a few hundred feet. But Reiketsu had plenty more replacements tucked away in the nowhere space inside her and they were up and flying again in an instant.

~ “*You know, the point is for you to try to chase us up into the air, not just throw things at us,*” ~ Tsumugu said through his earpiece.

“Yeah but there’s just so much ammo around here I can’t help it!” Aikuro laughed back, and then “-Uh oh”. He whirled around as from behind him Houka dashed in, threading through the rubble with his arm tilted back in preparation for one of his preferred opening moves, a fingertip jab to the throat or a pressure point. Aikuro dodged it and rather than give any ground sidestepped and made a precise grab to put him in an armbar, which would have worked if Houka wasn’t flexible enough to twist his body up and over Aikuro with until his feet landed on his shoulders, at which point he pushed off with enough force to create a massive crater around where Aikuro landed.

Houka, now airborne, turned in the direction he was sailing and said to Misaki, “Try and fire your vents now. Let’s find a new target before he can retaliate.”

~[*Okay! Let’s hop in against Nonon then!*]~ Misaki said, and attempted to fire the vents on her back and turn their direction to the right, towards where Nonon was taunting Yuda, Rei, and Shiro by flying above their heads and daring them to leap up and knock her down. Except for those with some form of cape or cloak like Seijitsu, Izanami, Wakaiketsu, and Tonbo, each kamui had some type of vent placed between the shoulder blades of their wearer that huffed incredible amounts of steam and flames as they fought. These vents came in plenty handy for dashing across the ground, but as Nonon already knew and the rest were finding out they were a bit weak for high speed flight. And even more importantly provided no way to *turn*.

~[*Oh shit!*]~ Try as they might Houka kept moving along his current trajectory. ~  
[*Nekketsu, wait!*]~

~[*Not falling for that again!*]~

Aikuro leapt up past them in a blur and axe-handled Houka right back down into the ground. The bowl-shaped crater Aikuro had left was now joined by another, even larger, that swallowed it and most of the rubble from the caved-in mountain. Amid the roiling dust Houka landed neatly on his feet, crouched low, and jumped up to attack Aikuro again. They fought for a moment, fists crossing dozens of times, dashing around in the air and on the ground between dozens of attempted grabs and pins and dozens of narrow escapes.

In a no-kamui, man-to-man fight Aikuro had the clear advantage. Stronger and more experienced, though Houka was no slouch either. But with the aid of their kamui, Houka actually had the advantage. The difference in skill was more than made up for by a feed of instinctive predictions on how Aikuro would move, deduced from analyzing all the footage of Aikuro in combat that had ever been taken. He nearly had Aikuro too and was about to send him flying with another mountain-breaking punch, but all of a sudden, he wasn’t there. Four short arms, each bearing a roughly wrist-length little rocket thruster, unfolded from what had looked like a single large vent on his back. Houka could only watch as they all turned and boosted him to swing around

behind his back. Aikuro wound up for a powerful blow but Houka turned around fast enough to divert it with a deft twist of his hand.

“Whoa!” He shouted, “Nice move there!”

“You like? It just suddenly clicked for Nekketsu right then. Here, take a look,” Aikuro said proudly. This was about the one major way kamui training differed from a real fight – all the “stop, wait, let me see that move you just did again” moments that interrupted the flow. It even got Yuda’s attention, and he bounded over.

“Breakthrough moment over here?” He asked. His Kamui, Rama, had yet to make any progress. Her base form left Yuda’s shoulders, and upper arms bare, instead having a form fitting armored breastplate that framed his musculature in a smooth silver blue. It connected to the back vent by a wide mantle on his upper chest, circular with concentric rings of blue pulsating out from his neck across its sleek black surface. A wide belt with a huge buckle met it around his waist; it was embossed with gold in sharp, abstract patterns. Beneath that, a fabric similar to a skirt or loincloth extended down almost to his knees, also patterned with blue and gold, and along the sides of his legs glowing lines of blue ran down to his mid-calves where they bent, entwined, and came together to form sandals that securely bound his feet with many sea-green strips of leather, a thick sole, and pointed metal clad heels and toes. Rama’s eyes peeked over his shoulders on two wide plates, shaped like hand fans or fins, which were rimmed with bright gold and made of the same silver-blue metal as his breastplate. “You might be the first then.

*~[Yeah,]~ Rama agreed, the petulantly huffed, ~[Mataro figured out how to expand his cloak like a flying squirrel, but **that’s** not flying it’s just gliding.]~*

*~[So? How’d you do it?]~ Misaki asked breathlessly.*

Nekketsu proudly jumped in on it, speaking to the other kamui while still floating a couple feet above the ground, *~[Well, I’d already developed a new form at Krakatoa so I’ve got the advantage, but that was in the heat of battle so this is the first time I’ve gotten to really think about it. And you know what it was? It’s like that feeling you get when you transform. You know the one. How once the blood’s in you it suddenly feels like you’ve been cut loose, like you’re rushing away from yourself, like you’re... expanding, I guess. And then you contract back, only this time your body isn’t shaped the way it was before!]*~

*~[Sure.]~*

*~[Well, you just have to take that feeling and bring it out all the time!]*~ Nekketsu explained as though it was the simplest thing in the world. But the other kamui still looked unsure so she said, *~[We all know that across the dimensions we are much, much more than what we can see – that’s scientifically proven. Our bodies are crammed into these little outfits like Ryuko’s body is crammed into her flesh. When we transform, it must be all of our life-fibers unwinding, showing us just for a moment a glimpse of what we really are. So what you have to do is remember what that feels like and try to hyper-focus on just your body until you can reawaken that sensation. The moment I did that I felt like I could decide what parts of me unwound, when, and how they came back together. It’s like Aikuro said, it just clicked for me after that. Wasn’t easy though, I’ve been pretty much out of it for most of this fight.]~*

*~[I see. So it seems that it’s a matter of mental flexibility, so to speak. How interesting,]*~ Misaki said, and that was the truth. Only, it wasn’t just interesting, because she liked to imagine that she had the same kind of mental flexibility. She’d considered the implications of the power-up

transformation to changing forms, in an academic kind of way. But making herself feel it was harder than it seemed. It was a little distressing to think she might be *too* analytical to make this work.

“Then the next question is what can you do with it?” Houka asked, taking Misaki’s mind off her worries.

“Let’s see. You’ve seen hovering, side-to-side dash,” He demonstrated each of these. The rocket thrusters on their jointed arms were capable of turning lightning fast, propelling him to dart back and forth. The noise they made while at this dull eb was a gentle whistling, precise sounding, to match with the clean blue cones of flame that they projected.

“Plenty agile,” Yuda nodded, “What’s the max speed?”

“Don’t know,” He turned around to face out over the expanse of the now shattered valley. “Let’s find out!”

Thrusters flared to life, rising from whistling to roar, and Aikuro shot off like a bullet into the sky. He rounded the fractured peak of the mountain he’d been hit into (and this was not a small mountain, it was miles away from where he’d lifted off) and returned, skidding along the ground and coming to a halt a bit past Houka and Yuda. A big, stupid grin cracked his face and his eyes were alive with a childish wonder that contrasted to the worldly expression they usually held.

“*Wow*. Oh wow. Yeah I... I get it now,” Was all he could say. He looked down at himself, his feet back on the ground. It seemed so unbelievably close, so *real*, after seeing the world from thousands of feet in the air.

~[*Yes, but for it to be really perfect we need something to stabilize your legs so they stop dangling around. Let’s see...*]~ Nekketsu said, and set to work crafting a sort of stabilization fin that erupted from the sides of his calves. Not a very complex design, just pale purple triangles, but they would help him fly level.

“Yep, that’ll work,” Aikuro said, eager to get back up into the air.

~[*Well now hold on, it’s not very stylish.*]~

“Ugh, c’mon!”

~[*Hey! I’m also learning how to work transformations too! Give me a sec to... how’s that?*]~ Nekketsu twisted the fins, extended them, so that now their tips formed out from the front of Aikuro’s knees and wrapped back to their position on the sides of the calves. She also added an darker colored, thicker rim around them and finished it off with a polished metallic sheen. ~[*See? Now it kinda looks like the ends of bellbottom pants! Not exactly the style of the moment but you make it work, eh?*]~

“Cool! Cool cool cool alright! Seeya guys!” Aikuro shouted. He leapt up into the air and tore off to try and catch up with Tsumugu. “HaHA!”

“Wha- come back here!” Yuda shouted.

“No way! You’ve just *got* to keep up!”

~~~~~

On the other side of the valley, Mako and Ira were not taking a very active part in the fighting at the moment. Instead, Tekketsu was trying fruitlessly to evolve a rocket thrusting flight form of her own. Ira sprinted across the dusty plains while Mako watched, drifting aimlessly with a concerned pout.

“Dya think you should go see what the guys are talking about over there?” She asked, “I hear on the comms Aikuro’s made some progress. You could get some tips?” (Mako was still a bit amused by all the military language that the kamui corps used. The rest of them called their earpieces, well, earpieces, but she still called them “the comms” because it sounded important.)

As Ira came to a stop in front of her, Aikuro abruptly launched away and Houka and Yuda jumped after him, now on the attack and trying to drag him down. Mako’s frown deepened. “Oh. I guess not. Dang.”

“Ah well, I suppose it’s no surprise they figured it out first, Nekketsu already had a form from Krakatoa just not a flying one. Don’t worry, it’s persistence that pays off in this game, we’re not done yet.”

*[Although it is tricky. I’d love to use a thruster technique like that, but my vents don’t seem to want to shift away from the contours of Ira’s muscles.]* Tekketsu reported. *[I know how to reshape them temporarily to make an armor piercing fire blast, but they always revert.]*

*[Identifying the problem is the first step in solving it,]* Tonbo said, trying to offer what meager encouragement he could. Tekketsu was not quick to frustrate, so it really upset him to see traces of frustration creeping into her tone.

“Maybe we need a different approach,” Ira said. “We’ll find it though; we’ve got all day. So turn that frown upside-down.”

Mako turned upside-down.

“You...”

“What?”

“How are you even alive?” Ira laughed, cupping Mako’s (upside-down) chin gently.

“I’m cute! Makes me very good at gettin’ people to do stuff for me,” Mako said smugly, “I do wish we could help though, it’s terrible but I just don’t think the way Tonbo flies is the same.”

*[No, it’s really not. All about feeling threads in the air, I just don’t really know what you’re talking about!]*

*[It’s too bad too, because I think if you had this ‘Kisaragi’ form that Ryuko and I have I think it would just come instinctively.]*

*[It’s not as easy as just absorbing more life-fibers,]* Tekketsu said.

*[No, I guess I’m just lucky to have such a compatible wearer.]*

[Well, don't go feeling bad about *that*,] Tekketsu said forcefully. [Never feel bad about *that*.]

"Hey, Ira," Mako said, "Lemme fly you up in the air anyway, alright? Even if you can't fly yet we can still have some fun! 'Sides, maybe if I drop you from high enough, you'll figure it out!"

"Sure, let's go," Ira held out his hands and Mako took them. Despite the fact that when Tekketsu was powered up Ira grew to nearly twice Mako's height, she lifted him off the ground with no effort at all.

"Whoa! You're so light! Feels like I'm liftin' a leaf or something."

"That's only natural, your strength is at a superhuman level and – WHOA-HO!" Ira was cut off as Mako tossed him gently. He sailed in an arc, tumbling head over heels, before Mako caught him under the armpits. "See? You're very strong."

"I know, isn't it amazing! You feel like nothing but, you weigh like what, 300 hundred pounds or so right?" Mako beamed.

"Yeah, about that. I actually don't get any heavier when I power up even though I get taller you know."

"And it's all muscle!"

"Not all of it, I've got like, brains and stuff too," Ira said.

"Nooo!" Mako said with a giggle.

Mako turned Ira around so she carried him under herself, dangling by the armpits and facing in the same direction as her. She flew him high above the ground, into the thicket of the battle but apart from it, like the eye in the storm of dancing lights and shockwave blasts all around them.

"It's so cool up here, right!" Mako yelled over the rushing wind. He head was right next to Ira's but they still had to shout to be heard at such speeds. "Wanna go faster?" She sped up before Ira had a chance to say yes. They swooped over the mountain ridge Ryuko and Satsuki were watching from – close enough for them to wave and Ira to wave back (Mako tried to wave but realized that if she let go of one of Ira's arms it would drop too far for her to reach it back). Then dipping down they zoomed breathtakingly close to the rugged slopes, sending snow flying behind them, and then arced up to drift high up into the air.

"Wow..." Ira murmured as he took it in. "I absolutely understand the obsession with flight. Not that it was ever a mystery, but you really have to try it yourself to understand."

"I know, right?" Mako said ecstatically, "It's like a roller coaster where you're totally free. You pick where you go and there's nothing locking your body in place. It's kind of like swimming, y'know? I feel like when I was little and dad took us to the pool, how you can just twist and spin around, totally free. It's so fun, I mean it's just *the best*." It was easy to feel that the kamui agreed – the stark simplicity of the sky resonated with something deep in them.

"Yeah... Oh! Speaking of, I just thought of a *really* stupid trick we could pull."

“Ooh! I love the sound of that!” Mako exclaimed.

“What if – and I know this will look ridiculous, but what if I stood on your back –“

“Like a surfboard!” Mako gasped, “Yyyes! That’s exactly what we need right now!”

*[It is?]* Tonbo asked.

*[Ira’s feet are rather large are you sure?]* Tekketsu added, also skeptically.

“Only one way to find out! Hup!” Ira swung back and forth and flung himself up, pulling a surprisingly acrobatic flip and landed on his feet on Mako’s back, feet squishing her split capes.

*[Hey! Watch the capes!]*

*[Sorry, sorry!]* Tekketsu blurted frantically.

“Hey! Get off my ass!” Mako shouted indignantly.

“I’m not!”

“You so totally are!”

“Well then make me!” Ira shouted back. But now that he had his balance and they could all take in the absurd sight of Ira’s huge body precariously perched on Mako as if she were a tightrope. They burst out in hysterical laughter for a solid minute.

“HAHAHAHA-haha-ohhh...” Ira eventually trailed off. “Okay, you wanna try and move?”

“Yep!” Mako quickly accelerated, and just as quickly Ira was ripped off his feet.

“YIEEE!” He yelped in an undignified way as he suddenly plummeted down towards the ground, but Mako was quick to come back around to catch him. After profuse apologies on her part, they agreed that he should hold onto the ends of her capes like reins. His feet where still whisked out from under him, but after a moment of grappling he managed to get it under control, standing with his feet planted just behind her shoulder, leaning back like he was steering a bobsled or something. Which only prompted another bout of hysterical laughter from them, and then from Mataro too when he came gliding along to see what the hell they were up to.

But their fun was interrupted when there came a sudden, bloodcurdling scream from the very peak that Ryuko and Satsuki had been watching from. “AAAAGH!” It was Ryuko, audible quite clearly in everyone’s earpieces but also softly in the distance with their own ears. And a pang of alarm and hurt roared out to the kamui, and right on its heels a dull ache of shock and frustration.

“Oh my god, Ryuko!” Mako gasped, suddenly aware of nothing else, and she grabbed Ira’s hand and dragged him away at top speeds towards the mountain peak.

When she got there, she found Ryuko with her head in her hands, looking unharmed but a bit distressed, and Satsuki sitting next to her, rubbing her back soothingly.

“Ryuko, what happened!”

“Nothing!” Ryuko blurted, “Everything’s fine, go back to what you were doing!”

“Fat chance of that!” Mako hurried over, “Are you okay? Is the baby okay?”

When Mako peeled her hands away, Ryuko smiled tenderly. That was greatly reassuring, “Yes, Mako, everything here really is okay. I’m sorry I scared you, but it’s already over.”

But Mako kept squeezing her hand, “Yeah but – I still want to know what could make you scream like that!”

Ira agreed, “Think about it logically, anything that could cause *you* this level of distress is sure to be a problem for us too.”

“Heheh, you know I really doubt that,” Ryuko chuckled, “ ‘Cuz the only thing that hurt me was trying to teach Sats how to fly.”

~~~~~

What had happened was that after a bit of time surveying the action Ryuko had said to Satsuki, “So, do you want to get in the action?”

Satsuki laughed, “What kind of question is that? Of course I do. Flight or not, I was planning on getting involved.”

“Well then, if I have your permission...”

“You do.”

“The check this out!” Ryuko said triumphantly, and with a flash of light Satsuki’s outfit changed. Gone was the simple dress she’d been wearing and instead shining armor plates, perfectly countoured to her torso and shoulder, and beneath that a wide, dress-like structure extending down to her feet. Only, it couldn’t be called a dress because it was completely filled, containing at its base the exhaust ports for a set of eight rocket thrusters, with stabilization fins around the outside. “Tada!” Ryuko clapped her hands, “I thought you might be familiar with something that worked the same way as the fight modes we’ve used before. Whaddya think?”

Satsuki ran her hand along the metal, “Amazing! And you think this will work?”

“Don’t see a reason why it shouldn’t.”

“You never stop, do you Ryuko?” Satsuki hopped up and kissed her.

“Stop what?”

“Finding new ways to make my day,” Satsuki hummed. “Only, I think it’s rather drab as is, isn’t it?”

“Oh, you wanna add some flair? Definitely,” Ryuko said, and they spent almost half and hour simply trying out different details and patterns to spice the new form up (this was the time in which Aikuro and Nekketsu obtained their new flight form). There was a lot of fine-tuning on the etched patterns in the metal, and some bickering because Ryuko always wanted to add too much shining silver or gold, but in the end they managed something both agreed looked slick and streamlined. “Now, only thing to do is test it!” Ryuko declared.



“Right,” Satsuki nodded, and that’s when it all went wrong. Satsuki’s face took on a frown of concentration, and the exhaust ports huffed to light with a roaring noise and gouts of blue fire.

And it felt like every part of Ryuko’s body – well, not her body, the part of her body that was on Satsuki – was stabbed and crushed all at once. Pain, pure and brutal pain, blotted out all of her senses and for a moment while Satsuki prepared to liftoff Ryuko could only watch helplessly. She was frozen by it, and panic crept in. *What’s happening! What’s happening!* A vision of her true multidimensional form under attack swept into Ryuko’s mind, *No! The life-fiber network found me!* She thought. She wanted to cry out, but the air was gone from her lungs. *It’s killing me!*

And Satsuki looked back, saw Ryuko’s eye’s bulging, mouth open in a wordless scream, and shouted in wordless alarm. The fires died down and she leapt over to grab Ryuko.

The vice grip on Ryuko died.

“AAAAGH!” Ryuko called out as soon as she had the breath to do it. “What the fuck! What the fuck just happened!”

“Ryuko I’m so, so sorry!” Satsuki said urgently, “Here, sit down, please.” Ryuko did, and Satsuki crouched in front of her, hugging her and saying, “It’s alright, it’s over.”

“Oho right, like you know! You can’t even *begin* to understand what just happened; it was... Sats something’s trying to kill me! I don’t know how to explain this, but it felt like my entire body was dying all at once and – ohgodohgod Sats the baby!”

Satsuki looked at her, moved Ryuko’s hands to her middle. Gently said, “She’s alright. See?” And indeed, there was nothing at all out of the ordinary there, Ryuko could tell that with her super senses.

“...Huh?”

Satsuki’s eyes went downcast, and she said, “Ryuko that was no... extraterrestrial attack on you. I know what just happened. I’m afraid I... tried to pull a life-fiber override on you... like I used to with Junketsu.”

That was something Ryuko hadn’t even considered. But yes, yes it was true without a doubt. “...That’s possible?”

“And if it causes *that* much pain... franky I’m not surprised it wanted to kill me,” Satsuki said, trying to lighten the mood, but she was stilling looked through Ryuko, to something far away only she could see.

“Fuck...” Ryuko groaned. She could see everyone wheeling around to come check on her, Mako and Ira at the front of the pack. It was over, and even though Ryuko still winced at the thought of it happening again she knew Satsuki would never mean to do it. But still, she hated to see everyone’s fun ruined just for that.

~~~~~

“You guys seriously, I’m fine,” Ryuko insisted, waving off her friends as they all buzzed around in concern. She tried to be annoyed, to remind herself that, *usually they wouldn’t be like this, they’d*

*say "Oh, Ryuko's a tough one, she'll handle it." Only because of the damn baby. But well look at them all, even Nonon was here asking if she wanted some water, food, a blanket or something. It wasn't their fault that's how they reacted. And besides, having Satsuki try to override her control of her own body was a pretty horrible new experience. Ah well, is it so bad to be coddled after something like that?*

For Satsuki though they reserved mostly sad looks and a quiet pat on the shoulder or two. Everyone knew that she was mulling over how the legacy of the bad old days had just resurfaced, what more could they add to that? Nonon spoke for all of them, hugging her and saying, "It wasn't your fault, we know."

Satsuki smiled softly and said, "I can only blame myself for not thinking about what I was doing, but that is still something, isn't it?"

"Well whatever, you seem sorry enough."

"Yeah, Nonon's right," Ryuko said, standing up, *I've got to act like a leader in this situation, and the fact is they won't go back to training 'til I stop moping* "Really, I could've been thinking about it too. But this kind of shit happens, right? I mean, what are we, kids? It's only fun and games 'til someone gets hurt?" A ripple of some low chuckles ran through the assembled group and Ryuko said, "Well, go on then! We'll be right behind you."

Seeing that Ryuko really was feeling better, everyone began to slowly filter away. Nonon was among the last to go and she asked, "We'll? You still think you're gonna get Satsuki in the air today?"

Ryuko nodded, "Yeah. Just like I said, I should've been thinking about it. If she can try to override me like a kamui, then I just have to be her kamui. *I have to be the one in control of her flight form. Pretty obvious when you think of it like that.*"

"Huh," Nonon said, "Well, I guess it's possible. Sooo... we're good to go?"

"Oh yeah, totally."

"Alright," Nonon shrugged and dashed off into the sky.

Ryuko chuckled and said, "At least she respects that I can take care of myself."

"Mmm," Satsuki hummed in agreement. She still looked to Ryuko like she was a little preoccupied though.

"Hey," Ryuko went over and hugged her, "You good?"

"I'm fine. You know how much I hate seeing you hurt though."

"I know. It's cute," Ryuko held her for a moment longer, until all the shock and hurt of that moment of pain was completely soothed away. Then she brightly said, "But dya want to try again? This time you don't need to do anything."

"Of course I do."

This time, after Ryuko turned her outfit back to its flight form Satsuki merely stood there and waited. It took Ryuko a moment to figure out how to fire her the rocket thrusters, but she'd

made her body transform or change in far more complex ways before. She just pictured the energy welling up inside the cylindrical barrels hidden within Satsuki's "dress" and before long they flared to life with furious red flames. Then all Satsuki had to do was leap into the air and she was off, with Ryuko whizzing up through the air behind her.

*So this is what it's like*, Ryuko thought, as she guided Satsuki through the sky, *This is what it was like on Senketsu's end when we flew*. Only that wasn't quite right, was it? Senketsu had been able to telepathically intuit exactly what she wanted to do, but Ryuko could only feel the physical contours of Satsuki's body. They quickly agreed that Satsuki should tell Ryuko where she wanted to go as though she were swimming, by tilting the front of her body starting with her head and neck. But Ryuko couldn't help but second guess, or get distracted even for the briefest moment. She kept yelling, "Sorry, sorry!" over to Satsuki whenever she missed something, but often these just fractions of a second and Satsuki hadn't even noticed that Ryuko had carried her on in the same direction. Especially the first time Satsuki tried to turn a loop in midair – Ryuko *had* to have misread that, but when she let Satsuki flip all the way over and heard her laugh in exhilaration she couldn't help but join in.

It would take weeks more of practice for this kind of flight to become "muscle memory" to Ryuko, to the point where she could guide Satsuki around without even thinking about it. But after they reached something close enough the two of them fell in with Mako, Ira, and Mataro, who were playing a game that could loosely be described as "Gamagoori dodgeball". Ira still hadn't managed to learn how to fly, but Mako lifted him high into the air and hurled him at Mataro as hard as she could. Each time, Mataro would dodge to the side, using a combination of his vents, wide and wing-like cloak, and Wakaiketsu's reflective nature to try and evade Ira's surging fist. If Ira scored a hit, then they would plunge down to the ground and spar there and if not, Mako rushed past to catch Ira before he sailed clear out of the battlefield.

Satsuki, dashed in and interposed herself between them, and as soon as Mako saw her her eyes like up. "Satsuki! New target, Ira!"

"What? Don't throw me at Satsuki – Aah!" Ira protested before Mako swung him around by the arm and hurled him right at Satsuki. But unlike Mataro, Satsuki had no reservations about using Ira as a weapon herself and at the last moment Ryuko dashed her to the side and she snagged him by the foot and threw him right back.

"AAIEEE!" Mako squealed and waved her hands frantically, too shocked to even try to dodge.

*[Oh no, Mako!]* Tekketsu shouted, and before their eyes something ballooned out from Ira's back. Parachute shaped, but made of a globular, dull and stony material, it broke his flight just like a real parachute would and suddenly he went from flying straight towards Mako to falling.

She caught him by the hand and said, "Whoa! What the heck was that Tekketsu?"

*[Just a spur of the moment thing,]* Tekketsu answered. *[It's the material I make Ira's Kyojin from. Some kind of liquid stone or metal, I don't know. I never tried to use it to make anything other than Ira's body, it comes out very misshapen doesn't it.]* The parachute on Ira's back shrunk up and vanished between the seams in her armor plating, and around Ira's free hand she projected more of the stuff to form a bigger version of it, like a giant mit.

*[That's it!]* Tonbo gasped.

*[Er, what's it?]*

*[This is how you can fly! You can make wings from this liquid stone!]* Tonbo said, and Tekketsu's eyes went wide with the realization that he was exactly right.

*[Tonbo you're a genius!]* She exclaimed.

*[Nah, c'mon, that was nothing,]* If he could, Mako's kamui would've blushed.

*[But it's true! That's such a brilliant idea – here, put me down real quick, I have to test this.]*

Mako let Ira go and as they descended a pair of roughly wing-shaped appendages grew from Ira's shoulders. Simple and lacking detail though they were, they were still enough for Ira straighten his body out and glide to a soft landing.

Ryuko watched Mako descend to help Ira and Tekketsu with this new form, and Mataro and Satsuki shrug and head off to join the main fight. She felt powerfully at ease. The pain of being overridden was but a distant memory.

*This is how it should be. This is what I want to do every day I can.*

~ “Hey, Ryuko?” ~ Satsuki voice piped through her earpiece speaker.

*Seeing new places, everyone having fun together.*

~ “Ryuko, please change my direction now.”~

*My kamui getting stronger, my friends becoming better and better fighters.*

~ “Ryuko I **will** hit a mountain if you don't pull up right now.”~

*And something good for dinner too. Yup, this is a pret-ty perfect day in my opinion. I only wish I could tell Senketsu about it. Soon enough, I guess.*

~ “PULL UP! PULL UP!” ~

“Huh? What's up Sats?”

~ “*Oh for the love of-*,” ~ Whatever Satsuki was about to say was cut off as she unceremoniously crashed into a cliff face at top speed. A huge explosion of dust and rubble kicked off, as well as the laughter of the rest of the kamui corps who had watched and heard the whole thing go down.

“Ah shit,” Ryuko muttered, and rushed through the air to Satsuki. She found her picking herself off, laughing and no worse for the wear except all the rock dust covering her.

“I suppose that was revenge for before, huh?” Satsuki said.

“What? No, I swear it wasn't!”

“You don't have to lie, come now. You got me good, I can't hold that against you.”

# Kamui Flight School Graduation

## Chapter Summary

UPDATE: Due to a short work-related trip and all the chaos that's involved with it, I don't know for sure when I'll be able to get the next chapter done. I'm working on it, but because my days are pretty packed I've been too frazzled to make much progress in the evenings. The trip will be over by the end of July either way, so by then I'll definitely be able to write even if I haven't already. Thanks for your patience.

July 2068

~~~~~

“Well folks, looks like it’s another bee-yutiful day here in nowhere, central Asia. Partly cloudy with no chance of rain, temperatures balmy now but dropping to a *cool* ten degrees Celsius by night. If you look to the west you will see a spectacular sunset beginning to unfold, and to the east everyone back in the civilized world is already asleep. And now onto Tsumugu with the traffic!”

Tsumugu shook his head and said, “Shut up and eat, Aikuro.”

Aikuro sucked his teeth, “Ooh! Uh, onto Yuda with the traffic?”

Yuda looked up from his dinner plate and said, “What traffic? Onto Mataro with the sports!”

This newscaster bit was something Aikuro had done before, they were all familiar with it. Mostly it was a bit, but Mataro’s sports update was real enough. “Yomiuri Giants have an unbeatable lead in tonight's game,” He said matter-of-factly.

“Hey, how about that!” Aikuro said happily. The Tokyo team, reformed after being decommissioned in the “bad old days”, was a favorite among the kamui corps.

“Hmm!” Tsumugu grunted in agreement, “Think they’ve got a chance at the series this year?” Which prompted a length debate on the merits of various teams.

Ryuko and Nonon were sitting together on a large rock with a speckled, salt-and-pepper grey color to it and eating their first courses of dinner off dented metal canteen plates that Ryuko had packed with their dinner supplies because she thought they looked tough.

“Geez, even when you *have* to eat you still eat like a bird,” Nonon said, poking Ryuko in the ribs with an elbow. It was true, Ryuko’s plate had only one unambitious piece of grilled chicken on it whereas Nonon had piled hers high with both the chicken and some side dishes like grilled vegetables and a potato salad.

“Yeah, and you didn’t before you got Saiban,” Ryuko shot back. “I’m saving room for seconds! Ira made some kind of sauce all by himself – said it had brown sugar in it. I’d rather

have that than just regular old potato salad.”

“Oh yeah?”

Ryuko nodded, “ I could just never eat that stuff. So like, heavy and mayo-y and just... blech, I dunno.”

“It’s good energy!” Nonon said. “And I’ve still got plenty of space for Ira’s fancy pork shoulder.” They watched as Ira, Mako, and Satsuki each busied themselves over their respective dishes on the portable grill. It was set up on as flat of a surface as they had but Ryuko had had Tsumugu look it over before and Gerry-rig clawed, gripping legs of adjustable height. Which was good, because this was no tiny, reasonable portable grill it was industrial in scale and if it slipped down the side of the mountain it would probably start an avalanche. Satsuki was working on the fish at one end, but Ira and Mako on the other were busying themselves over a huge hunk of meat.

“They do this good together,” Ryuko observed.

“Yeah, she’s got the passion, he’s got the patience,” Nonon said with a giggle. As if to prove her point before their eyes Mako suddenly reached down and pried a thin strip of meat off the pork shoulder. If it weren’t for Tonbo she’d have burned her fingers. Ira tried to slap her hand away but she was too fast and it was in her mouth and gone before he could do anything.

“Hey!” Nonon shouted.

“Ahh, she does that all the time!” Ryuko waved her off. “She came over to the house the other day and we made cookies – I know, I know I have like thirty cooks don’t even say it – and she took one right out of the oven, half baked, and ate it like that.”

*[How is it?]* Tekketsu asked.

*[Mmm. It’s cooked through but it needs a bit of time to simmer to let the flavor really sink in,]* Tonbo reported.

Nonon shook her head as though she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “Yup, that’s Mako for you. A kamui that like to eat... scary sight when you think about it.”

“Yeah sure. But anyway, what you were saying before. You want to make an all women regiment in the army?” Ryuko asked incredulously.

“See? Satsuki thought it was crazy too. But really, women soldiers don’t loot nearly as much, they don’t go whoring -,”

“- Hey!”

“Well, except the lesbians -,”

“Double hey!” Ryuko slapped her on the back of the head. “Don’t say shit like that, it’s sexist!”

“Oh bite me, you’re one to talk with the way you swear,” Nonon laughed.

“Nonon I guarantee you’ve said ‘fuck’ more times in your life than me. Bare minimum.”

“Yeah, but it’s not a problem for me. What’re you gonna do when you’ve got some sensitive ears listening in on everything you say, huh?”

Ryuko knew exactly what Nonon meant. She thought about it for a sec and said, “She’s gonna be a hybrid. Nothing I could do could stop her from hearing people cuss, hell she’ll be able to hear their *hearts beating*. But, I guess, I’ll... try and be better about it, I guess.”

“Well, anyway, I just feel like women soldiers are more willing to like, listen to the locals about their problems. Because that’s the thing, people’ve been saying we make the regular army obsolete but that’s not true, it’s just the point of them changed. They’re there to occupy and hold down the turf we win, we can’t be everywhere at once. Call ‘em glorified police if you want but it works, and I think women soldiers have some advantages. It’s not that crazy when I put it like that, right?”

Ryuko shrugged, “I dunno, if you’re asking my permission you know I don’t care. If you wanna run this experiment with your slice of the army you’re free to do it.” *I cannot believe that’s a sentence that just came out of my mouth*, Ryuko thought. *You’d think I’d have gotten used to it by now, but nope, still just so surreal.*

“I wasn’t, but thanks. That’ll give me something to throw in front of the stuffy oldsters on the council anyway. But speaking of experiments, I ran into a guy I know who’s a banker. Y’know, one of those fancy galas I attend to keep an eye on what the socialite crowd’s thinkin’. Anyway, he was talking about something you’d did, said it was really shaking things up, causing a lot of chaos in his business. He did one of these,” Nonon pulled at Saiban’s collar in a sweaty, stressed-out kind of way and made a grimace. “I think he thought I already knew what he was talking about too. Any idea what that’s about?”

Ryuko laughed nervously, “Ahahahhh, yeah I do, but it’s no big deal.”

“Ryuko, there a hundred-percent chance I’m gonna hear about this again. It affects me too,” Nonon said seriously.

“Fine, fine, but don’t go spreading this around,” She sighed, then leaning in close to Nonon and said, “I gave away all our money.”

Nonon – who was midway through chewing, suddenly whipped her head towards Ryuko. Her mouth was totally frozen, cheeks puffed out a bit from being mid-bite, and her eyes were suddenly wide and fully alert. Ryuko put a hand over her mouth and chortled to herself, because she fully believed Rei about the whole “if this gets out people will take it the wrong way” thing and really didn’t want to draw attention by outright laughing. But it wasn’t easy.

“You’re not serious, are you? You’re serious!” Nonon exclaimed.

“Hey, calm down,” Ryuko said, “It’s not a big deal, we set it up so Sats and I still have plenty to live on. But really, don’t go shouting about this because Rei says if we draw too much attention and make it sound like a big deal people will think they owe me, personally, for their livelihoods.”

“Well yeah sure that makes sense,” Nonon shook her head, “But no! I mean, what the hell, why!”

“We had more money than we could ever spend, so I gave it to the government, and they’ll find a million different ways to use it. Rei’ll be looking after it, she’ll make sure it goes to helping people. That’s all there is to it, really,” Ryuko explained, laying it out simply while gesturing with her free hand.

“Huh well I mean...” Nonon trailed off, because quite honestly that didn’t sound super unreasonable. But then, on the other hand...

*[I know what you’re thinking,] Saiban said, [And yeah, you might be the wealthiest person in the country now. It was a hell of a gap between first and second though, the amount in that Kiryuin fortune... I can’t even imagine.]*

“You and me both Saiban, and I read the damn bank receipts over Satsuki’s shoulder from time to time!” Ryuko chuckled. “But now I don’t gotta worry about it anymore.”

“Right... you aren’t gonna try and get me to do that, are you?” Nonon asked. Ryuko looked utterly stunned and shook her head vigorously, and Nonon asked, “... And Satsuki?”

“She had her issues, there’s upsides and downsides, but she came around to it. It’s kind of nice, actually. She made a budget like a normal person, even put away a little for Nozomi’s college fund and all that. That kind of thing, y’know it’s fun to her.”

“Ugh,” Nonon rolled her eyes, “You two and your domestic bliss. How’s that treating you, anyway?”

“Oh, it’s fine. I’ve gotten a lot more time to work on my fashion design lately,” Ryuko answered, “And since you guys have been taking over the war and Rei’s doing a lot of the... eh I dunno, the administrative side, I guess, Sats is finally getting around to finishing her dissertation and that means I don’t have to follow her around to her office as much. I mean I still do, but it gives me a chance to, y’know, read shit I’ve been meaning to read, finish my tv shows and games and whatever. She just sits there and writes all day sometimes, it’s kind of amazing. But, y’know, between that and going down to the lab to absorb more life-fibers I keep busy.”

“Right, so I assume this whole sudden, complex plan to get rid of your fortune is a product of *keeping busy*,” Nonon said with the deepest skepticism.

Ryuko sighed and then said in an angry whisper, “Alright, if you need to know yeah, I’m *fucking* bored! You happy? I mean, I do all this shit, reading and doing fashion work and stuff, I do! But shit, I bounce around from one thing to another all day – hour a’ this, hour a’ that - but I’m still just hanging around the house, either way.”

Nonon chuckled, “Geez Ryuko, can’t sit still for more than an hour, maybe Uzu was right and you do have ADHD.”

“Yeah yeah, but seriously I’m a grown woman, I can’t just sit around the house watching tv and playing video games all day!” Nonon nodded. She could’ve pointed out that practicing martial arts, what Ryuko would’ve been doing instead, wasn’t necessarily any more “productive” than that. But for them martial arts was an end unto itself. Ryuko went on, “That’s why I try and have Mako over pretty much every day, and if not her someone else or I’ll hang out with Mom all day. You aren’t by as often as the rest of the gang, by the way. Yeah, I noticed.”

“Ryuko come on, you know how busy I am running this war.”

“Yeah, well your boyfriend finds the time to come over. He even modelled a suit I made!” Ryuko exclaimed.

“Really? Who’s it for?”



“Dunno. Him, I guess, though why he’d ever wear it when he’s got Seijitsu I don’t know. I just kinda made it.”

Nonon put a hand on her chin thoughtfully. Yeah, that sounded like a bored Ryuko alright. She couldn’t even distract herself from it by getting drunk. *You can have as many hobbies as you want, but I guess it doesn’t matter if you feel like you ought to be working for something bigger. What in Ryuko’s life could be bigger than having a baby? I mean shit, it’s big for Satsuki.* “So if you’re so bored then what would you do instead?”

Ryuko looked at her, “Uh, Kamijustu? I mean, Sats and I were all set on this big project to turn how we fight, with our powers, into a real martial art. I can’t stop thinking about it, I’ve got all these *ideas* for when I get back. Like, I’m analyzing your recorded fights, splitting your different styles into schools and all that. I’m serious, I’ll show you the notes sometime.”

“Really? What school am I in?”

“Oh, you’ve got your own, for sure. Snake style!” Ryuko said proudly, “Yeah, so far I named each of you guys’ styles after your old animal nicknames. But I mean, you know how you fight, how you feint and dodge all over the place. Nobody else does it like you do, and you gotta admit the way you dance while you fight is super snakelike.”

Nonon giggled and said, “Well, originally that was a jab from Houka about my ‘poisoned tongue’, so it’s an improvement, to me. So what are the others all –,”

“Hey Nonon! Sweetie!” Uzu called from the circle where most of the group was sitting.

Nonon pretended like this was some huge inconvenience to her, “Ugh, I told you to knock it off with the pet names! It’s so tacky.”

“Ah, whatever. Could you play us a song though?” Uzu insisted, “Just until the second course is done?”

“Play you a song? What are you talking about?” Nonon asked, but even as she said it she could see that Tsumugu had produced an acoustic guitar from one of Reiketsu’s many transdimensional pockets of with their mysterious depths. “Oh, *come on* you guys.”

“Sorry, but Uzu asked me to carry it along,” Tsumugu shrugged. Nonon was acting so frustrated because this wasn’t just any of the many guitars she owned. No, this was a truly ancient designer model she’d bought at an auction. Simply the best acoustic she’d ever seen, the depth of its tones, it was her baby. Only her Stradivarius violin rated better. They’d brought it all the way out here; it would simply be a *crime* not to play it.

“You idiot,” She said to Uzu. “Well, give it here,” Tsumugu passed it to Uzu, who strolled over and handed it to her gingerly, as befit the venerable instrument. Ryuko reached over and ran her hand of the detailed carvings, floral patterns and doves perched on thing mahogany branches. “I guess you leave me no choice.”

And so Nonon strummed out her first chord. Then tuned the guitar, grumbling to herself that whatever temperature it was inside Reiketsu’s mystery pockets if the strings got even the slightest bit distorted there would be hell to pay.

And then she played. She closed her eyes and picked out a melody, improvising on the spot to create a song that was soulful but far from somber, with an upbeat tempo. It was not a display of superhuman skill – of how swiftly Nonon could strum, of how nimbly her fingers danced between the frets – anyone could have played this song. But could they conceive of it so effortlessly? Could they pick each note so lightly that they sounded as though plucked from the breeze? Could they strike each chord with such heart that it summoned up a warm, mysterious feeling in the chest of everyone who heard it? There were only a few masters in the world who could compare or outstrip her.

For a while, everyone finished their first courses while quietly listening to the soundtrack of Nonon's guitar, the wind, and the sizzling grill. When Nonon finally stopped because the second course was ready Ryuko said, "What song is that? Feels like I've never heard that before."

"No song in particular," Nonon shrugged, "It's just how it feels sitting up here and watching the sun go down."

~~~~~

"So, today went pretty good, huh?" Mako asked, "Seems like everyone made progress."

"Mhm!" Ryuko agreed brightly. They were laying on the bare rock (the mountain peak was still stripped of snow from Tsumugu's close flight earlier that day), heads together, watching the sky slowly turn dark and listening to Nonon continue playing. Now that dinner was done and most of the supplies were put away, they lingered for just a bit longer to see the sunset through to completion. "Nekketsu figured out a flight form pretty much right away, Wakaiketsu and Rama both have gotten some form of gliding wings and thrusters, so they'll get there with a little practice."

Mako giggled, "Kind of funny how there's turned out to be so similar."

~[Yeah, that's because she **copied** me!/~ Wakaiketsu practically shouted from across the group.

~[I did **not**! You copied me, you would have never figured out how to change the angle of your thrusters if I didn't do it first!/~ Rama protested, and though this was deathly serious to them it was just an amusement to everyone else, even their humans.

"Right, and then Houka and Shiro are being all stubborn about theirs. They want to be able to fly how we can, but I don't think I really get how they're gonna do that," Mako said.

"Me neither."

[I think I did,] Tonbo said, [In short, they believe that the way that you and I fly, Ryuko is by tapping into our true bodies that exist out there in the multidimensional world and moving our bodies directly. Invisible hands steering us like a child with a toy airplane.]

"Hmm!" Ryuko hummed in understanding, "I never thought about it like that, but maybe they're right."

[I suspect they are, and now they're going to try instead of propelling themselves through the air using rockets or wings to construct a form or a device that lets them do the same. Look at them,] Houka and Shiro were sitting to the side, and while it looked like they were just talking to

each other their kamui were in constant communion with their computer hubs back in Japan. Calculating, simulating, experimenting. *[Clearly, they are engrossed in their task.]*

“Yeah, I bet they’ll figure something neat out eventually. Even if it’s not quite that, they’re bound to invent some cool way to fly if they keep at it long enough,” Ryuko agreed, “And then that leaves just Rei and Ira. Furashada developed a good look flight form too-,”

“We’re not done with it though!” Rei called over from her spot in the circle.

*~[That’s right,]~ Furashada agreed from his place perched on Rei’s shoulders, ~[My flight form is a lot like Senketsu Shippu – a dress with rocket thrusters – and it works but it is a little derivative, isn’t it? We’re going to keep going, maybe develop a second flight form that focuses not on speed but on agility. That sounds good, right?]*

“Yup! Great idea,” Ryuko gave them a thumbs up and Furashada glowed with pride, “But what you’ve done so far is super cool too!”

“So then that only leaves Ira...” Mako concluded.

“What about me?” Ira asked, suddenly looming over them and then crashing down to sit beside Mako. “Wait, no, I can guess. You’re talking about what progress everyone made today. Well...”

*[Gliding wings still are something.]* Tonbo said.

*[Even if they are just ugly chunks of stone, huh?] Tekketsu said, [Well, to be honest, I was thinking about trying again to reshape them into something more useful, but I’m having trouble getting the shape right.]*

Ryuko sat up, “You know, we’ve still got a bit of time. And we don’t all *have* to head home together. Mako, you guys wanna go help them out?”

Mako’s eyes lit up, “More flying? Sure!” And she drifted off the ground and took off, Ira close behind, dropping off the mountainside and transforming as he did.

“Ahh, well that’s nice for them,” Ryuko said to herself. She’d be half expecting Ira to take the opportunity today to propose, and he hadn’t yet. *But what the hell, this will give him one last chance.*

She got up, made her way around the outside of the crude circle everyone had formed, sitting and drifting into and out of different conversations. She stopped by Satsuki, pressed a kiss on the back of her head, and when Satsuki asked how she was doing Ryuko murmured that she was ready to head for home whenever Satsuki was. Then she unwound their arms and headed over to Nonon.

Nonon was the only one who wasn’t really in the circle or the conversation. She was too engrossed in playing, still sitting on the speckled rock with her empty plate next to her. Ryuko sidled up and said, “That sounds really good, you know.”

Nonon smirked, “I know.”

“And you’re really just making it up as you go?”

“Sure am,” Nonon said, then she briefly considered shooing Ryuko off so she could keep focusing but instead she said, “Well, it’s not like it comes out of *nowhere*. The keys I use, how I change between them, the melody, motifs, it’s all stuff that’s pretty conventional to the genre. But they’re conventions for a reason.”

“Hmm,” Ryuko murmured. She sat there listening for a moment before finally working up the courage to say, “You should teach me how to do that.”

Nonon didn’t stop playing, but Ryuko could see her shoulders tense momentarily, “What, you want to learn guitar? You want me to teach you?” She let out a short laugh, “Yeah, that’d work out great.”

“Wha- why not?” Ryuko protested.

“Because I’m not a high school marching band conductor anymore, that’s why! I mean, the gulf in our skill levels is so vast,” Nonon stopped herself and then said again, “-I really don’t have time for it. You’d be better off with someone whose actual job it is to teach.”

“But that’s the thing Nonon, I mean I get that,” In truth, Ryuko had a strong feeling that, *it isn’t that she really thinks I’m just too terrible to be worth her time. She’s not a teacher, even if she knows everything about music she wouldn’t know where to start explaining it to me.* “I know I could probably learn the basics just by watching videos online. But the thing is I don’t wanna just kinda know how to play, if I’m gonna do this I want to be able to make *music*, be actually good. And who better than you for that?”

Nonon rolled her eyes, “Oh please, you’re just saying what you think I want to hear. You just want another hobby to keep you busy for the next four months, that’s obvious. You know what it takes for me to be this good? What I do when I’m not training or at war? I go home and I play music, or write music, or record or edit. And that’s what I’ve done pretty much every day for my entire life. So, are you going to go that hard?”

*Oh you dense little bitch,* Ryuko groaned internally, *if you want to say no, then just say no! Don’t give me a whole lecture about it.* “So you think I won’t practice? That’s it? Well yeah, that would be a waste of your time if it was true, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah? Well then, it’s too bad you’re the one who can’t sit still for more than an hour,” Nonon sighed, “Look, Ryuko, I’m not sayin’ you couldn’t be good at the guitar, or that it’s not your style because I bet it is the right instrument for you. I just can’t do it. When I used to teach kids, at Honnouji, I was their band director. They had something to prove to me so they practiced and they listened. I don’t know how to do it without that kind of... teacher-student relationship!” She stopped playing momentarily and held a hand up, as if in surrender too that fact. “Music’s not for everyone, Ryuko. Lots of people try, get started, and then it just kind of... winds down. And you’re absolutely the type to do that. At least you won’t waste money buying a fancy guitar you’ll never touch, you got plenty of them as coronation gifts.”

“I donated those to a museum,” Ryuko said softly.

“Well whatever. The point is sorry, I just don’t know if it would work out.”

Ryuko looked her in the eyes and said, “Nonon, I’m not asking this as like a ‘I’m hiring you as my teacher’ thing, I’m askin’ as a friend. So I’m sorry if I disrespected the amount of

practice you put in, but what's it gonna take, huh? Because if you say no I'm not gonna just go and find another person, I wanna learn guitar the way *you* play it. Y'know, that special "airy" sound?"

That got through to Nonon. "You really like that, huh?"

"W'll yeah, of course."

"Because you know guitar's not even really my specialty. Piano is my main instrument, guitar I'm good but y'know not quite world class."

"I'm not learning the piano," Ryuko said with a dismissive laugh. "But like c'mon. Remember back when before you got Saiban, and I taught you what you needed to know to sync with him?"

Nonon scoffed, "That was completely different."

"Yeah, but you still learned, didn't you? So maybe I won't be all 'thank you sensei,'" Ryuko did a little mock-bow. "But I'll still learn." Nonon sighed again, bigger, and Ryuko said, "So what'll it take?"

"I dunno..."

"And I won't even be startin' from scratch, either. I took some music electives in college."

"Music *electives*? What is that, music appreciation?" Nonon's eyes narrowed skeptically.

"Nah man, like, 'guitar for beginners' and music theory and shit. Real classes."

"And you passed them?"

"Well-," Ryuko caught herself and they both started laughing, "Okay, okay! But it's not as bad as that. I just had a really shitty final project in music theory and I bombed the written tests. But the practical tests I did fine on!"

Nonon stopped playing again and gingerly lifted the guitar, rotated it, and held it offeringly to Ryuko. "Show me then?"

Ryuko took the guitar as gently as she could and began to pick out a song she'd learned for that guitar class. Something from out of the lesson book, but it was one of the solos near the back of it – not a beginner's piece.

"Hmm!" Nonon said appreciatively, and the others clapped politely. *Well, now that they've all noticed I can't exactly say no, can I.* "Yeah, alright, fine. You have potential. Now gimme that back."

"So?" Ryuko asked leadingly as she returned Nonon's guitar.

"Yeah, let's do it, what the hell," Nonon said, and when she saw Ryuko beam she said, "But! You will practice. Satsuki'll keep you honest, I'm sure. And I won't let you quit either, no way I'm letting this just be a distraction 'til that kid of yours is born."

"What, I don't get a maternity leave?" Ryuko teased her.

“Do you get a maternity leave from being queen?” Nonon shot back, “No? Well then I think you’ll be able to handle this, too.”

~~~~~

*[No, it’s still not quite right,]* Tonbo said. They were down on the valley floor, a valley that seemed to be growing increasingly gloomy. The lights Tonbo and Tekketsu produced lit the sand around them, glittering shades of blue and red-orange dancing together.

“Yeah, not wide enough, the picture says the feathers should be like... this,” Mako moved her hands along the outline of one of the stone feathers of Tekketsu’s new wings. Ira twitched slightly and the whole wing shuddered and creaked, but it didn’t stop Mako from guiding Tekketsu along to shape the feather. Before her eyes the liquid metal expanded and reshaped, forming intricate vanes until it fully resembled the wide flight feather of an eagle’s wingtip.

*[Looks good!]* Tekketsu swiveled her huge eye to take a look, *[It really does, Ira.]* He on the other hand couldn’t quite tilt his head to look at it, especially not while trying to hold still.

“We don’t have to do that for every one, do we?”

“Nah,” Mako shrugged, “She’s just got to make the rest look like that and then we’ll fiddle with the exact sizes.”

“Oh, okay.”

*[Simple enough,]* Tekketsu had turned her new wings from rough-hewn chunks to an image of what she thought wings looked like. But try as she might, they couldn’t lift her and Ira’s attempts to glide were awkward and shaky. It was too crude, too cartoony, the aerodynamics just didn’t work. So now, Mako diligently guided each feather to the right form, all based on a picture of an eagle’s wing she had looked up online. It didn’t take long, just a light touch to each of them, showing Tekketsu how long they should all be.

“And done!” Mako smacked her hands together proudly, “Give ‘er a whirl!”

Ira flexed the wings, gave them a few experimental beats (or was it Tekketsu? With these sorts of instinctive motions it was hard to tell which off them controlled it). “Yeah, that feels a lot better. I can tell it’s catching the air.” And then he jumped, not with much force, just enough to rise fifty feet or so into the air. From there with a few mighty wingbeats, he climbed higher, then swooped down, spiralling back gently towards the ground. The thrill of flight had him chuckling to himself

“Wow! You look so cool! You’re like an angel from one ‘a them old paintings!” Mako exclaimed.

“Yeaheheh, that is pretty cool,” Ira said, folding his arms proudly. In his larger than life powered up form that was just the right height for Mako to jump up and stand on them to kiss him on the nose, which she did. “But it’s still not perfect.”

“Awww!”

*[It’s true, there’s something off about it. You’re still having trouble holding your legs straight and horizontal,]* Tekketsu observed with a puzzled tone to her voice.

Ira nodded, “It’s nothing bad for a short flight like that, but for longer ones it’ll be hell on my core muscles. Maybe flying is like swimming for you Mako, but it seems like I don’t float on air.”

*[Hmm, didn’t Aikuro say something about needing to hold up his legs too?]* Tonbo wondered.

“Oh!” Mako snapped her fingers and said, “A tail! That’s what you need! A big wide tail like a bird!”

*[Is that what birds use their tails for?]*

“Yeah totally! Birds have cute little feathery tails to keep their rumps up, who doesn’t that!”

*[Well then what about bats?]* Tonbo asked, just messing with Mako at this point.

“Well, he’s not a **bat** silly! He’s a great big, majestic eagle! And eagles have tails,” Mako said. “Stop undermining ‘em!”

*[Oh, he is not undermining anything,]* Tekketsu said. *[Let’s try it.]*

It only took a moment more for a wide fan of feathers to erupt from Ira’s lower back – Tekketsu knew how to shape them now. And now when Ira leapt into the air he could glide, swoop and fly in any direction nimbly. Mako was quick to follow him.

“It works!” Ira crowed, a wide smile of wonderment crossing his ordinarily serious face. Especially when Mako zoomed up and floated right in front of his face. Wow, how natural she looked up here, hovering hundreds of feet above the world as though it was nothing. “Is it because of your life-fiber compatibility that you look so at home in the air? Or is that just how you roll?”

Mako giggled, “I think it’s just because I’m so cool. What, would you prefer if I was like this?” She threw her arms around his neck and hung as though she couldn’t fly. Even while she pretended to be totally limp she did her best to press her body as close to Ira’s chest as he could, and grinned at the flustered look on his face. “Oohhh Ira it’s so high up! It’s scary! You gotta hold me *tight* or heaven’s knows what would happen!” She shouted in a high-pitched voice as she writhed around.

Ira laughed and said, “Well while you’re here, let’s find out just how tight you can hold on. And how fast I can go!” Ira shot forward with powerful strokes of his wings, kicking up dust across the valley. Mako’s yelp quickly became laughter of exhilaration as they shot forwards, faster than any natural bird could. The twin glowing lights of the kamui flashed through the evening gloom in a single, razor thin line.

*[It doesn’t even feel real, that’s what you’re thinking right now,]* Tekketsu laughed in his ear. *[It is like a dream, isn’t it?]*

*[I’m jealous, I have to admit,]* Tonbo said, *[Fun though it is I’ll never be as impressed as you can be with it.]*

*[Is that so?]* Tekketsu said. There must be something that would impress him then, right?

“IRA WATCH THIS!” Mako shouted and suddenly unwound herself. She dropped out of his grasp and floated around to above him, keeping pace, and then dropped to kneel on his broad shoulders like a knight riding into battle.

“HAHA! Much better than me trying to surf on you, huh?”

“What?”

*[He just said this is better than when we were doing the opposite earlier today,]* Tekketsu said. Telepathic voices didn’t get drowned out by the rushing wind.

“Oh! Haha, yeah!”

“HEY MAKO WATCH THIS!” Ira bellowed as he wheeled around, turning to face a mountain. They sped directly towards it.

“OHO YEAH!” Mako yelled when she realized they were barreling right towards its rocky face. But at the last moment Ira pulled up, so close that he grabbed a chunk of the peak as they passed. “AGAIN, AGAIN!” she shouted against the wind. Ira turned around and charge the mountain again, only this time Mako stomped down on the back of his head and so instead of pulling up they dove directly into the side of the mountain in a splash of rocks and dust.

~ “*The hell is going on over there!*” ~ Ryuko called over their earpieces, but by the time the dust settled the two of them were just sprawled out, still laughing giddily, in craters in the rough shapes of their bodies shattered into the mountain.

“Ohhh I love it,” Mako gasped, “Oh I love this so much! What should we do now?” She didn’t want to admit, but the light was fading rapidly. It would soon be time to go home.

“Well, now that we’ve got that sorted we should probably start for home. Or we’ll be left behind.” Mako’s face fell, but then he said, “But before we do that, there’s one question I need to know.”

“What’s that?”

“I need to find out how high we can fly like this.”

~~~~~

*We must be in the stratosphere by now,* Ira thought. *It’s so cold, the air feels so thin it’s like we’re in space.* He kept barelling directly upward, slaloming back and forth with Mako doing the same so the trails of light their kamui left blended together in a helix. *It’s a good thing kamui protect from the cold, or we’d be dead right now I’m sure. Not to mention we’re still breathing. How is that?* “Tekketsu answer for me if you can, how am I still breathing?”

*[I don’t know. It’s not my doing, there’s clearly enough oxygen in the air.]*

“What? But I thought we were in the stratosphere right now!”

*[You’re kidding right? We’re only maybe... five kilometers up, tops.]*

“WHAT?”



*[It's true! I did it the way you always do distance on the ground. 'How many Honnoujis are there between me and there?']*

Ira frowned, "It's not as easy up here."

Tekketsu sounded like she was smirking, *[No, it's not. So do you think this is high enough? Every stroke is getting harder and harder.]*

Yeah, sure, Ira said, and banked slowly to a hovering stop. The beating of his wings stayed powerful, but up here in the thin air they struggled to hold him aloft, so he sunk a few meters until some kind of equilibrium was reached. Below them the mountains looked like little more than rumpled little dunes, casting shadows in long lines. And beyond them...

"Whoa..." Ira mouthed as he took it all in. The curvature of the Earth, from this high up it was like the sun had risen again, and now was only beginning to set. Looking at it, Ira could really, truly picture the land below him as a huge globe rolling through space, turning ever so slowly away from the sun. He felt like he was about to get motion sick. Or maybe that was the gut lurching effect of the sheer, spectacular scale and beauty of it.

And he wasn't alone. Next to him Mako was staring openmouthed at the setting sun too, watching how the clouds beneath it stretched out, dyed orange and purple. "Looks kinda like a scoop of ice cream that's melting, right?"

"Hm! Yeah, it does. Beautiful isn't it?"

Mako didn't respond verbally to that, she just murmured something and took his hand (Tekketsu swiftly released the 'size distortion' power she had over Ira so that his hand was so huge she could barely grab a finger). "Ira? How're we breathing up here?"

Ira snickered, "It's not as high as it looks, I guess. But it's hard to believe, isn't it? Especially when there's such a breathtaking sight right here."

"Iraaaa! That's such a corny line!" Mako swatted at him lightly.

"What? I was talking about the sunset."

"Oh."

"What, did you think I meant you?" Ira asked innocently. "Well here, let me see." He turned around and took her hands so that they were facing each other, one side towards the sun and the other the night to the East.

"If you say somethin' like 'no, you're even more breathtaking' or whatever I'm gonna slap you!" Mako huffed.

"You don't want me to?" Ira asked softly.

"I didn't say *that*."

Meanwhile, while they held each other their Kamui were having their own conversation – no matter how loud they got they couldn't be an interruption. Tonbo's eyes darted everywhere, enthralled by every little detail, constantly asking Tekketsu what she supposed something was, if that distant city light was Beijing (it wasn't), if she knew any of the constellations (she did).

*[The world really is something amazing, isn't it? This planet. Every day it brings me new surprises. You must feel the same, don't you?]* Tonbo said.

Tekketsu swelled with pride, *[And didn't you just before say you weren't impressed by flying?]*

*[Well,]*

*[No, I know, I know. It is really amazing. It's funny, the humans are so used to this planet they don't even realize how beautiful it is. Until moments like this]*

*[I don't know whether to pity them for that, or to feel jealous because they've gotten to see so much more of it,]* Tonbo agreed.

*[Quite... and when they do they realize it they get so caught up in the moment. Don't they Ira?]* Tekketsu lightly squeezed on his torso to get his attention, and all of a sudden he realized the very specific thought that Tekketsu was driving him towards.

*Oh shit, she's right. This is the moment.*

"Uh... instead of saying that... why don't a do one better..." Ira said, suddenly nervous and trying not to stammer, fishing around in a small hidden pocket on the side of his waist. Where he kept the tiny case that held his sword in its shrunken form. And a small ring with a very large diamond. "Mako..."

"...Ira?" Mako's voice was suddenly very small.

"I... don't think there'll ever be a better time than this..." Ira said, still haltingly. Every second longer it took him to dig the ring case out only made him feel more certain he'd drop it. More certain that delay would ruin the moment. *What the hell am I doing? Am I really doing this?*

*[Wait, what's-]* Tonbo started, but then her saw the look in Tekketsu's eyes. *"Shut up and let the humans do the talking for both of us"* it said very clearly, and Tonbo suddenly felt a tremendous tenderness emanating from her. Tekketsu had lived among the humans longer, she understood the emotional significance of this moment like she was a human. But for Tonbo, *[Oh no]*.

"No way!" Mako's hands were over her mouth.

*[Just relax, Ira. You know she'll say yes, it's as good as done already,]* Tekketsu always knew what Ira needed to heard. Ring case now secure in his hands, he unclasped it in front of Mako.

"Will you marry me?"

Mako was about to hyperventilate. *Just stay calm*, she thought, suddenly extremely self conscious, *You know what you're supposed to do. When she's proposed to, a woman is the center of the world. You've got to look the part! But why's that, only because people are watching? Did she want people to see her get proposed to? Mako realized, why should I care? I need to prove to people how much Ira loves me? I need everyone to see me and think I'm so beautiful?* It was actually kind of a scary thought, realizing that, *I don't have to act for everyone who's watching, it's just us. A million miles in the air there's nobody who matters except us. And wasn't that right?*

Wasn't that the way it should be, the really romantic way? *Yes, yes it is! We're like... like angels or something up here, this is the way real, alive angels would do it. Only still... oh geez I mean what do I do with my hands? What do I say? What do I do?*

It didn't help that her kamui was equally overwhelmed too.

On Ira's end, he cleared his throat and said, "I, uh, I don't really have a speech or anything."

"Well, uh, t-tthat's okay, really," Mako started.

"But! I just want to say something. I... well just look at us, where we are," He gestured towards the surrounding sky. "This is magical. This is our life. You know what I used to be like, back at Honnouji. Before I knew you. There was no room for magic in me back then, was there?"

In spite of herself, Mako laughed, "You were a pretty sour egg, huh?"

Ira smiled and all that needless tension died just a bit, "Yeah, well, things were bad back then. You never seemed to notice that then but – well, no I know that isn't really true. That really is something I love about you, you know? Honnouji was meant to break people's spirits, but with you we never got close." Ira realized he'd gone wildly off what little "script" he had and said, "A-anyway, the point is that I love you, and I really don't see any other way to be that would be better than this, and so I want you to marry me. And that's all there is to it."

*[And Tonbo, I know for you this is very sudden. But you understand what this means for us too. It's okay if you're not ready and-]*

*[No. This is what I want.]*

If Tekketsu had a heart, it would have skipped a beat. Tonbo had said before that he was okay with their arrangement, but since then he'd had more time to explore the world. To get to know the other kamui. To realize how much else there was out there besides her. He was one of those newly-awakened kamui whose curiosity was boundless. Kamui didn't *need* to choose a partner, they entered the world fully matured, the only limitation on their lives was their human. Even if Mako and Ira were married it didn't mean he wasn't free to choose. Would he really choose her? Had he secretly been cringing in awkward discomfort all those nights they spent sitting together as their humans slept? *[It is?]*

*[Of course. Even if there were millions of other kamui in the world, would the rest of them have accepted me, like you did? I just don't believe it. I feel like... I don't know how to live with anyone the same way I am with you. I wouldn't feel normal without you.]* Tonbo had expected, just as Mako had, that this day would come. And fortunately the "script" he'd come up with felt right. *[I don't know if it's too earlier to say I love you, humans have rules about these things but... I am very fond of you.]*

*[... Yes. Then I feel the exact same.]*

"Well, Mako?"

Mako realized that as the kamui talked she'd been staring off, glassy eyed. What a poet her kamui was. *Oh my sweet little guy, I'm so glad I have you,* Mako thought, feeling a pang as all the times she'd caught Ryuko talking to Senketsu flashed by. Why hadn't they gotten to be happy

together like this? *I guess all I can do is be doubly happy for them.* “Huh? Oh! My god, yes, yes!” She blurted, “Only, I *can’t* take it.”

“...What?”

“Ira, if I try and take that ring now, and I drop it, we will *never* see it again! And I’m *going to* drop it, you know I will!”

Ira smiled tenderly and laughed softly in his throat, “Oh, of course. Stupid of me.” He took her hand and guided it over to clasp on top of the ring case, secure in his grip. And in the slowest and most careful motion he allowed her to scoop it up. No chance in hell of it falling.

Mako held the ring, slipped it on her finger, and said (almost to herself), “Yeah, I think I will.”

“Huh?” Ira asked as if he didn’t already know the answer. And instead of give him one Mako floated up and kissed him, long and passionately.

When they parted she grinned and said, “That felt better, actually.”

“What, better than kissing when we’re standing on the ground?”

“Nah. Better than kissing before we were *engaged*,” She smirked, “Because – wow! Ira, we’re really engaged! And – wait, were you planning this for today?”

“No! Honestly, I wasn’t. Though I have a sneaking suspicion Ryuko told us to go out after dinner just so I’d have a chance for it.”

Mako gasped, “Ohhh, you’re so right! Gosh, that Ryuko, when did she get so smart?”

“For you Mako, she can be a genius. Oh, I’m sure you want to go show her that don’t you?”

“Sure, totally!” But Mako didn’t immediately peel off and descend towards the Earth. “Only, do we have to go just yet?”

“I don’t see why there’s any rush.”

“Good,” She turned around in Ira’s embrace so that they could watch the sun with his arms enfolding her, “After all, the sun isn’t even set yet.”

# No Take-Backs

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

August 2068

~~~~~

Ryuko was at Nonon's Tokyo apartment for a guitar lesson. There wasn't really a set time or place for these meetings, it was basically whenever both of them weren't doing anything else. Ryuko even jetted over to the mainland sometimes to find Nonon in her camp on the front lines. But Nonon's apartment was her favorite. In the soundproofed recording studio the walls were covered in a museum's worth of instruments – ancient violins, rockstars' guitars, horns and wind instruments Ryuko had never even heard of before – and the floor was littered with amps and mic stands and drums and wires. The whole place smelled woody and clean, exactly how she imagined it should. Sometimes they even used the microphones and all the electronics in the little control room behind the window to record themselves and play it back, repeating and highlighting all the details.

It really was everything that Ryuko wanted. It was a real jam session; how real musicians spent their day. She was thrilled to be there. And Nonon, obviously, was happy to have a friend who shared even an ounce of her passion. So even though Nonon loved to joke that she would have to sic Satsuki on her to get Ryuko to practice, they surprised themselves with how well they worked together.

Well, most days. Today though Ryuko was far from on her A-game.

"That's the third time you've done it the same way!" Nonon exclaimed, "Stop cutting the last note in the riff off like that, you've got to hit it with a little more energy and then just give it time to breathe."

"Nonon, it sounds the same," Ryuko huffed. Nonon tapped her guitar impatiently and Ryuko said, "Alright, but you and I are probably the only people in the world who could tell the difference. How can you even tell, anyway?"

"Natural talent and years of practice," Nonon answered, "You don't have to be superhuman for that." Ryuko rolled her eyes and Nonon said, "Look, you wanted expert level training, I'm giving you exactly that. Suddenly that's too much for you?"

Ryuko, though her fingers tensed with frustration, was very gentle as she set her guitar down on its stand. "Y'know what? Just... forget it for today. I can't focus on it," She said dejectedly.

"Why?" Nonon's eye's narrowed, but they quickly opened again when she realized, "Oh shoot! Today's the day you're meeting with the prince from America, isn't it?" Ryuko nodded and raised her eyebrows to say, "*Yeah, now you get it,*" And Nonon said, "Well you could've just started with that," and set her guitar down as well.

At this point Uzu came in, opening the heavy wooden door and leaning through the doorway. He and Seijitsu looked like they had just finished getting ready for the day – Uzu’s hair was still wet from the shower and Seijitsu looked crisp and fresh-ironed. “Damn, you got up early today – oh, hey Ryuko, what up?”

“Nothin’ much!” Ryuko smiled back, mood restored by his upbeat greeting.

“It’s not *that* early,” Nonon snarked back at Uzu, “I basically just got up.”

He narrowed his eyes appraisingly and said, “Nah.”

“Whaddya mean ‘nah’!”

“You did your hair already,” Uzu said. Nonon opened her mouth to protest but he said, “It looks good.” He gave her a quick kiss and turned to go, “Well, we’re off to spar with the guys, see you there later?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Nonon shrugged, as if he even needed to ask.

“Cool. Have a good one Ryuko!” He was about to leave when, “Oh, by the way, bug lady’s here.”

Nonon hummed in response to that and Uzu shut the door and was gone.

Ryuko giggled, “Bug lady?”

“He means exterminator,” Nonon rolled her eyes, “We brought back some kind of weevil or whatever in our luggage on Friday. Little jerks are running all over the place. I guess it’s invasive to Japan or something otherwise we were gonna just put out glue traps.”

“Geez. I woulda thought you wouldn’t like having glue traps around messing up your ‘feng shui’ though.”

“I don’t. But what the hell else do you do? Anyway though, what’s up with meeting this American asshole, Satsuki’s really not coming with?”

Ryuko nodded. She was glad for the chance to confide this in Nonon, and immediately her nerves died down a bit, “Yeah that’s the thing. Satsuki says there’s no way he’ll stop until he hears from my mouth that I’m not taking the money back. Especially after what he said to Rei the other day.”

“I heard about that,” Nonon said with a grimace. “Fucked up.”

“Right? ‘Is there anyone else I can speak to,’ I mean, who does he think he is!” Ryuko exclaimed.

Nonon laughed, “What do you expect, really? She’s black, homosexual, *and* a woman. Hard to tell which of those he hates most.”

“Heh, yeah. So anyway, you get why Sats didn’t want to just have Uzu go get chummy with him, because if Uzu told him no too he’d just ask ‘up the chain’ again. And if she was in the room with me, then who do you think *he’d* think was the real decision maker?”

“Yeah, I get that,” Nonon said, “Only trouble is you don’t want to be the real decision maker either.”

“I know!” Ryuko sounded offended by that truth.

“He would be more, like, persistent I guess if Satsuki was in there too,” Nonon observed, “Because she’s an actual politician and all, so he’d probably think there was some kind of deal they could come to. I’m sure he doesn’t have a clue what you want.”

“You think? What, is he gonna try and bribe me?” Ryuko let out a bark of laughter, “Hah! What’s he gonna do, offer me money when I just gave all mine away?”

“Well not money, but I know what these people are like. Usually, they’ll go the high-class prostitute angle, but you’re... maybe not the target audience for that. But you never know. Maybe there’s some American celebrity, like a fashion designer or a director, who he thinks you’d want to meet. Maybe he could offer you like, an island vacation with that person,” Nonon explained, “Stuff like that.”

Ryuko frowned, “I don’t think anyone would refuse to meet me if I sent an invite. And there isn’t really anyone I’m too big on meeting right now. Well, maybe... nah, not even them.”

“Yeah, the high society clout angle isn’t really gonna work, you’re way more famous and well-liked than him. Which leaves only one thing.”

“Threats.”

“Yup!” Nonon agreed, “Satsuki really did cover the whole deal with you, huh?”

“Pretty much. She said he’d start with the threat of cutting us out of the world’s whole global trade system of whatever. You know what I mean. Sats seems to think that’s a pretty serious one because it’s not just American companies we have stocks in, so like lots of countries have weird, government types who are mad at me for this.”

“Right, they could try and cut the League out of the world economy cold-war style. Maybe get countries to reconsider if they want to be in the League at all.”

“Yeah, sure,” That sounded vaguely like something Ryuko remembered from history, “But Sats says I shouldn’t be intimidated for that for like, five different reasons. Like because they need us as much as we need them and because we could be self-sufficient even if they did that and y’know other things like that.”

“And I think we’ve earned enough loyalty that nobody would seriously think about jumping ship just to make a buck. I mean, people literally think you’re the second coming, there’s no amount of money made or lost that can change that”

“Right. So it’s all just a bunch of hot air. Same with threats of actual war because, like, bring it.”

Nonon giggled, but she said, “No, that could actually be pretty troublesome. Not that we wouldn’t eventually win, it wouldn’t even be fair. But that doesn’t mean they couldn’t launch attacks around the League too fast for us to be everywhere at once. Hell, we’re already kept busy with one enemy at a time. And our army... well they *want* to fight REVOCS because, y’know, all

the stuff they did. I don't think we'd get the same enthusiasm if we redirected them to some other country you just happen to have beef with. I mean, there's a reason for us to have that fight but the crimes of America just seem a lot more abstract to people than how REVOCS literally enslaved them and killed their family and forced them to build doomsday machines."

Ryuko shook her head, "No. If that happens this time we aren't relying on ordinary soldiers. I don't want them dying over this bullshit."

"So what, we just hit them first and hit so hard they can't even try and hit back? Seems like the simplest solution."

"Uh, well that is what I had in mind," Ryuko said, "Why, what's wrong with that?" Was Nonon about to object to basically being ordered to go kill innocent Americans? *Well, not that innocent, they're soldiers, but compared to REVOCS that's small beans. Still, nothing I could say if she was, not like I want her to do it either.*

"Nah, if it's got to be done there's no problem."

*[If we have to kill someone, at least American soldiers won't have their minds ensnared by the life-fiber network when they die.]* Saiban agreed. *[I don't think we'd have a problem swiftly showing them just how outmatched they are and then we could end the whole drama with minimal bloodshed.]*

Ryuko shrugged, it was true enough. "I don't even want to think about it. A war, and here we are talking about how we're gonna start it, and how we're gonna fight it. You're not mad at me, are you? For making this whole situation happen in the first place?"

"Well..." Nonon started, but then she shrugged and said, "I suppose not. You do what you're gonna do, no use complaining about it after the fact. And your heart was in the right place, can't really fault you on that."

"Heh, thanks. Still, just 'cuz I made this mess doesn't mean I'm the right one to clean it up," Ryuko moped.

"Well you're no worse than the guy you'll be talking to," Nonon said dismissively. "I've met him, he's a through-and-through bastard."

"Oh yeah? What, did you two go to the same country club?" Ryuko asked snidely.

"Literally yes," Nonon said, and when Ryuko snorted out a short laugh she said, "No, I'm serious! I mean, this is the emperor's nephew we're talking about here, that old fuck is so paranoid he's had like half his relatives imprisoned or assassinated for plotting against him. And – to be fair – maybe they were but you've got this, er, what's his name again?"

"Joseph Galton."

"Ugh, what a fucking saltine cracker of a name, holy shit. Well anyway, this is the kind of environment this guy grew up in and yet somehow, he's not just survived but he's like, the Emperor's favorite. Even over the guy's own son! Who's dead now, by the by, so don't bring that up. And this isn't like, the Australia situation where Liza's dad was like, a kind of well-meaning dope who the army shoved into the top seat as a figurehead when they took over. In his day the emperor was a serious hardass, like he was *the guy*, he was that top general who declared martial



law and basically overthrew the United States. So you can just imagine what an evil fuck this Joseph is, not just like a smooth political operator but he fits in *that* culture. I mean, he drives around in the Texas wastelands in an IFV with his ‘knights’, murdering little refugee children!”

Ryuko looked horrified, mouth agape, “He does not! That’s... that’s not true, is it?”

“Well, he kills the adults too. It’s true, but it’s not really the point. See that’s – I get why Satsuki didn’t tell you this, she wants to spare you from knowing all this shit.”

*[Plus, I’m sure she doesn’t want you to kill the man the moment you meet him,]* Saiban joked.

“I heard that,” Ryuko grumped, but she did crack a smile.

“But this is why a guy like him can be so gung-ho about threatening you with war. To these high society types it’s a just a game, they don’t hardly even consider themselves to be part of *any* nation. It’s all just numbers and money to them. Two of ‘em, in two different countries, could both be plotting wars on each other and then when the war breaks out be like, ‘Oh, but we’re still going golfing on the weekend, right?’ “ Nonon railed, “No that’s true, honestly, I saw this kind of thing when I was a kid. Only at the time I just assumed Satsuki was going to conquer the world and she’d put a stop to them.”

Ryuko frowned. *What’s even the point of us meeting then? What am I supposed to say to someone who thinks like that? He’s not someone to make deals with or treat politely, he’s an enemy! How messed up can the world be, that it really is only the most heartless people who get to make all the decisions?*

Nonon’s expression softened – despite having perked up a bit to banter with her Ryuko was definitely still quite worried about this whole thing. “You know, one other thing about these kinds of high-level diplomacy trips is that they’re usually pretty casual. I’m sure our ‘friend’ from America expects to have some time to sightsee. That can be today. If you’re not feeling up to it.”

Ryuko seriously considered that, but she shook her head, “Nah. It’s better to get it over with. I know that in the end all I have to do is just sit there and say no to everything he says and then it’s done. It’s just if he’s such a smooth operator, what if he runs circles around me, makes it sound like what he’s saying is good and mutually beneficial or whatever?” She sighed, “I’m just not the person who should be in that room, I don’t want to fuck it all up.”

“Oh please, Ryuko,” Nonon chuckled, “I think you caving to this guy is the last thing we need to be worried about.”

~~~~~

The city of Tokyo was under construction. Towering industrial cranes dominated the skyline, and the air was thick with the clanking, engine noises, and monotonous beeps of construction machinery. Occasionally a cloud of dust would rise as a derelict building was torn down. Poverty had kept so many ancient husks up for decades past their expiration, but now that was changing. Fresh funds for every urban restoration project that had ever been pitched were suddenly flowing, and soon not just Tokyo but every major city in The League would look like the new Osaka – shining, futuristic, and green.

Ryuko's office window did little to stop all the noise of the construction from seeping in. She had a nice view of it too; this was a room on the top floor of the new congressional office, built on the spot where the old Kiryuin Conglomerate tower had stood. It wasn't the sort of thing Ryuko really had much of a use for, but she couldn't just *not* have an office in the capitol building.

And even if she didn't love it much, she had to admit it was imposing. The room was mostly stark, with a few plush but sleek looking couches off to the side and fountains springing from the black stone walls on either side of the desk. The desk itself was even more impressive: it consisted of four rounded pieces with polished basalt surfaces that surrounded a huge leather chair. At the press of a button, each piece could rise from or descend into the floor. Ryuko joked that it looked like a receptionist's desk, but it allowed for her to set her desk to get the view of the city or – as it was now – so that from prince Joseph Galton's perspective she was framed against the sunlight beaming in.

"Your Majesty Queen Ryuko Matoi, it is an honor to finally meet you," he said. Or rather, the translator standing next to him said. Ryuko's English was more than good enough to understand that what he really said was "Well, what are you waiting for? Greet her." Because of course he did.

She hated him instantly. Not the translator, mind, the prince. He wasn't a horribly evil *looking* person, just sort of a "well bred" white gentleman. Sandy blonde hair, a strong nose and jawline, fairly tall, but too thin and gangly to really be called handsome. Ryuko would've said he even looked pretty meek, if it weren't for the way that he carried himself. That tightly clenched jaw, the tension making his body as stiff as his ill-fitting suit (Seriously, what was it with these guys and their starched white suits? Ryuko couldn't understand how anyone could wear something that looked that much like a Cover). But more than that, there was just this look in his eyes. Contempt. Ryuko only needed one good look at him to know for sure, *Oh, he hates me. And he's not good at hiding it.*

*Maybe I can enjoy this after all.*

"Oh please, the pleasure is all mine," Ryuko answered in English. She'd improved on what she learned from Ragyo's memories by practicing with Satsuki, and though her voice was still obviously not that of a native speaker her accent was nowhere near as thick as it had been. "We won't require the service of your translator," She said, with all the politeness she could muster (this was easier in English, almost like playing a character). She then said directly, and forcefully, to the translator, "You may go."

The translator gave a glance to his master, who shifted uncomfortably in his chair and said, "I, er, appreciate the courtesy, your Majesty, but wouldn't we understand each other better both in our native languages?"

Ryuko chuckled confidently, "No, it's fine. I can speak English, and I can understand it too. How else could I watch your movies?"

Joseph had no choice but to nod for the translator to leave. Which he did, hesitantly. It seemed pretty clear to Ryuko that they were planning to have their own little side conversation. She glowed with pride, having shown them that she would've understood it all anyway. Once the translator was gone, Joseph said, "First, I should say congratulations. You must be very excited."

"Yes, I am," Ryuko said, and let that just sit there uncomfortably.

“I apologize, for being unable to attend your coronation,” He said. “My uncle, you know, with his condition,” He chuckled casually, as though this was something relatable.

“Well, that’s okay. Just a party. I’m sure there are millions of people who wanted to go much more than you who couldn’t,” Ryuko said.

“Yes... well. Your Majesty, you’re a busy woman, so I’ll get to the point. I came here today not only as the representative of His Majesty the Emperor, but with the backing of the international community. You see, His Majesty and the rulers of many nations have found issue with your recent decision to... let’s say ‘*nationlize*’ the Kiryuin – that is to say – your fortune,” Joseph eventually finished.

“Issues?”

“That’s right. And now this has *nothing* to do with your intentions. No, they are highly laudable, bold and impressive. But that being said, intentions do not mean much in this world of countries and international affairs. We all understand though, after all you are new to this world. In this case we’re reaching out because your inexperience will affect all of us,” He said.

Ryuko just sat there, arms crossed. *He’s condescending to me!* She realized, and then, *Well of course he is, even though he knows what I’m capable of this guy doesn’t see me like that. He just sees a pregnant little Japanese girl with a fancy hat!* It was an irritating thought. She wished she had worn her full royal regalia instead of the somewhat less awe inspiring black and orange-red skirt suit she’d transformed into that morning.

“You see, such a large fortune as yours does not consist primarily of hard cash, but of investments – stocks and whatnot,” And he launched into a lengthy explanation of things Ryuko already knew: about how she was transferring effective ownership of corporations around the world to The League itself, and this was just not done. “You’re upsetting a very delicate balance here. Other investors are not going to feel comfortable with this, as they won’t be able to predict what The League will do. What if they need some extra funds, and decide to dump all their stock in a company at once? Can you imagine the chaos that would cause? And that’s not even mentioning the instability this brings to the companies themselves. You will be costing many people – powerful people – around the world a lot of money.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ryuko said, “All that sounds pretty obvious to me.” She also knew that what really concerned him was that if they wanted, her friends who controlled The League government could halt all operations for nearly half of all American corporations, collapsing their economy near instantly. And no doubt, they expected this to come as prelude to a war of conquest. But he wasn’t going to outright accuse her of that. “But what do you want me to do about it now?”

“Well, simply transfer your ownership back. You are the Queen, are you not? Surely there’s no harm in the Queen being the richest person in her own nation. And if not that, then sell off the stock assets in your fortune now, on the open market. If you’re really not interested in keeping it, that would still provide a major windfall to your League of the Pacific. I’m certain it’s within your powers to do this, what do you say?”

Ryuko chuckled. Now it was her time to show him, “Listen, Joe – “

“-It’s Joseph.”

“Sure, yeah. I don’t know know what to say. I thought Rei told you already, the money’s gone. It’s been spent. You want to see the money? It’s right out there,” She gestured out the window at all the construction work going on outside. “We’ve already put it to use.”

Joseph’s mouth hung open and Ryuko felt a deep pride. “Well, uh, even if that is true, it need not be the same money. Your government has other sources of income through which you can be reimbursed, I can assure you.”

“Even if I could though, I wouldn’t want to.”

“Well that’s –,” Joseph stammered, frustrated, but then he sighed and said, “I see. Well, I can’t say I don’t understand why you feel this way. You want to help your people, that’s what a good ruler does, isn’t it? Well it might be disappointing to you, but I have sat by my uncle’s side for most of my life and I’ve seen him deal with many similar issues. This approach just isn’t in your best interest. I know the supply of funds seems endless now, but it will run out faster than you think, and when it does the people’s hunger for aid won’t stop. They’ll remember this time as a boom period, but after it always comes the bust. Trust me, they’ll be more productive, and you’ll be able to focus on your other aims if what you provide is stability, not this kind of uncontrolled prosperity.”

“Stability, huh?” Ryuko murmured. To her that sounded like a version of, “*You must become an iron fisted fascist like the rest of us*” that was meant to fall more gently on naïve ears, or maybe a way to slowly ease her into that conclusion.

Joseph was on a roll now. He went on, “We in the international community feel that cooperation is in all of our best interest, and you’re someone who right now *everyone* is eager to work with. You’ve certainly made a big splash, I don’t think I have to tell you that the formation of the League of the Pacific is a historic event – conquering so much land, so quickly, with such a widespread popular support.”

“We’re not conquering it. We’re freeing the people from REVOCS,” Ryuko quickly blurted. She couldn’t resist making the correction.

“Yes, I’m sure that does make it easier. But in any case, you can understand that after such a momentous event, the diplomatic situation has changed significantly. Working with us in a situation like this is, frankly, critical. This is how we ensure peaceful relations, it’s a give and take. And I know it seems like we’re asking you to give a lot here, but do this, and we can be very good friends to you.”

“That’s nice and all, but I have plenty of friends,” Ryuko said. “I get what you’re saying, and I want our countries to get along too. But just your ‘good graces’? That’s not even close to a good trade and you know it.”

Joseph sighed, “Yeah, alright, I thought you might say something like that. In that case, there’s something I’d like to show you,” He took out a tablet from the small briefcase next to him. It quickly turned on to display twinkling atoll, dotted with brightly colored high-rises, cute little towns, and docks that launched sailboats into shockingly pristine looking tropical waters.

“Nice,” Ryuko nodded.

“Isn’t it? The Imperial Resort is very exclusive, and we’d be more than happy to open our membership to you and, of course, your family and close confidants. All expenses are covered, so

you need not worry about bills if you decided to sell your assets off instead of reclaiming them. You like American movies, yes? Well, many of our biggest stars and most visionary directors frequently vacation at the resort, I'm sure they'd be thrilled to meet you. And I don't think I need to tell you that every possible amenity is provided, *including* several which would not be available if the island were not located in international waters."

Ryuko's eyes narrowed, "And why would I be interested in something like that?"

Joseph chuckled, "Well, I wasn't expecting to have to be explicit about that, but I'm sure we both know what I'm talking about. You're Ryuko Matoi! Your appetite for female companionship is world famous."

"I'm a married woman," Ryuko said, voice low. *World famous! What gives them the right to pry like that! Do they really think I look back on that time of my life and wish I could do it again? Not that there weren't things she missed, but she wouldn't make that trade on her life. No, this guy thinks I'm just the same as him, except less experienced, stupider. Well, he's nothing but a weaker version of how Satsuki used to be, I'm sure that he thinks of himself as just like that!*

As if to prove her point, Joseph said, "And that's why the invitation is extended to your family. I truly do not believe that the Satsuki Kiryuin of Honnouji is bound by such antiquated notions of morality. You may not have use of the offer now, but in a few months time... I can assure you the staff of the Imperial Resort will *not* leave you wanting."

Ryuko shook her head. Sure, Satsuki had warned her about this, but it was just *too* much. "Sorry, no sale. And don't bother trying the next offer, I'll say the same thing. I have plenty of islands of my own, but I also have a billion or so people who are counting on *me*. I'm not selling them out for any price."

"Your Majesty, please, don't take this path," Joseph said. He was staying cool and as suave as his frail, pallid self was capable of, but there was a tinge of frustration in his voice now. "The welfare of your people is insignificant compared to peaceful and friendly diplomatic relations, especially with America."

"Actually, there's nothing else that matters more to me. No sale. I'm not taking the money back."

Joseph looked genuinely annoyed now. "If you're trying to figure out just how much pull you have, I'd suggest you stop now," He chided her, "We can work out any sort of equitable deal you'd like, but don't try to kid me. I know you're not a communist. The Matois and Kinagases both are respected, accomplished families of scientists holding lucrative tenures at major universities, not bleeding heart activists. Listen, this is hard, because you do have my undying thanks for saving our world. But that does not give you the authority to use your position as a cudgel against the rest of the world, especially when intervening in such a delicate economic establishment using money which – I should add – is not even yours by inheritance."

*You fucking idiot!* Ryuko wanted to shout gloatingly to him, *You don't even know that the Matois are all fakes, all algorithmically generated faces made by my dad. Your brain would break if you knew what I really am!* "You don't know the first thing about me. If you'd seen what I have, lived on the streets and in the Honnou-town slums like me, then maybe you'd understand. But then, you probably wouldn't be the one sitting here, would you?"

"This is getting us nowhere. The simple truth is that this matter is just too important to America to take no for an answer. I came in the hopes of reaching an agreement, but if you really do choose

this path, then we have other ways of bringing you to the table. An import-export sanction, for example. No shipments in or out. We'll freeze you out, you see."

"Go for it. See how that goes for you."

"You – really?" Joseph was shocked, genuinely. He'd expected more back and forth on that, or at least some surprise.

"Sure, what do I care? We've been doing pretty well economically lately, I'm told. Besides Indonesia and the rest of the area affected by the volcano, obviously, but once we get done handling REVOCS and rebuild a bit we'll be pretty much self-sufficient. You can thank Rei Hououmaru for that; you met her, didn't you?"

"Self-sufficient? Impossible."

"Then it's impossible for you too," Ryuko said proudly, "Point is I don't care about that."

"That's very unfortunate. Then it looks like we are done here. I'll relay your decision to my uncle and his advisors, but I already know how this will go. I don't think they're going to see any alternative to military intervention."

Ryuko blinked. She had been warned that Joseph would threaten violence if he didn't get his way, but to actually see it happen in front of her was just... something else. *What kind of slimeball is this guy, acting like he's not one of those advisors?* She frostily said, "I would think they might have a problem going to war with us while we're fighting REVOCS." And this was her legitimate reaction, not stringing Joseph along. It was just so unbelievable that this was really what he was saying. *Do you just not care that we're literally defending the Earth? We're protecting **your** life and you don't care?*

"Without Ragyo they are merely insurrectionaries! You seem to have them well in hand. In fact, it seems surprising that it has taken you so long to get them under control, aren't your kamui supposed to be superhuman?" Ryuko's mouth hung open, and Joseph went on, "Look, I'm sorry, I'm sure they really do want to destroy the world. But so do ecoterrorists, for our intents and purposes. Fighting insurrections is simply a constant part of ruling. You'll see."

Ryuko was at a loss. "Well, if you really think we're not capable of stopping a few little terrorists then why don't you declare war right now? Why didn't you lead with that? What're you afraid of?"

"War is such an ugly thing. I came here in hopes that we could come to a peaceful understanding and avoid all that ugliness."

"You don't know the first thing about war. I've been to war. We both know you can't defeat a kamui, so you came here to try and intimidate me because there's really no other option for you. So what will you do now?"

"There's nothing else I can do. If you're unwilling to cooperate, I'm done here," He started putting his tablet away. "All I can say is that I wouldn't be so casual about this if I was in your position. You say you've experienced war, so you know that in war lots of 'the people' who you claim to care about die. Cities burn. Business is ground to a halt. You might see a bit of a change in their attitude once that begins."

“See, that was REVOCS’ mistake,” Ryuko said. She leaned back in her chair, thinking confidently *Well, now I just have to deal with his last few threats and then it’ll be over. I did the best anyone could expect of me, Satsuki warned that we’d probably have to sink a few ships, trash a few air-force bases before they learned their lesson. Oh well, guess that’s how it goes.* “I remember back in the early months after we defeated Ragyo, they managed to disappear off the grid. If they’d just stayed there, lived normal lives, we wouldn’t have bothered going after them and nobody would have cared. But instead, they tried to counterattack, and so here we are.”

“Yes, but America is not REVOCS. I’m sure the people will understand that we will stop the moment we get what we want,” Joseph said, really trying to make it sound as forboding as possible.

“Then go ahead and try. *I’m* sure that most of the world will show a little more loyalty to the people who saved them than you do.”

That told him the meeting was over. He held up his hands, “Alright, alright. I apologize for my tone; you must understand that I’m only here as a representative of my country. You’re dangerous, and we should think carefully before beginning any military action against you. You’ve made that perfectly clear. But America is dangerous too. And we can’t back down in this situation. Perhaps your right, and your supersoldiers will be too much. But let me give you one last piece of advice: I don’t know as much as you about waging war, it’s true, but I do know what it’s like to grow up during one. As the son of some important people, I can tell you it was not pleasant. Having to go without, constantly moving from one safe house to another, the chaos and disruptions, the assassinations.”

Ryuko’s eyebrows flew up – she understood why he was saying this, but she couldn’t believe he’d have the nerve - and Joseph smirked and said, “Oh yes. You see, my uncle has never been fully able to bring the rebellious coastal population centers under control, and yet they could never hope to win. So, they resorted to assassination. They were up against a more powerful foe, what else would they do? I’m just telling you this so you know, as a mother, it’s not a threat. I just think you ought to know what it was like. But the danger was always there, and plenty of my relatives were killed too. Like my cousin, you know, the original prince. He didn’t make it. Car bomb. And you can imagine how that affected his fath-“

Before Joseph could even see what had happened, Ryuko’s finger flicked out and from it a razor thin thread shot out, glowing amber-red. It snagged to Joseph’s nose and then immediately pulled taught, yanking his face down into the solid stone of the desk.

“Ough! You... *bitch!*” He grunted in shock and pain, clutching his face as a dribble of blood began to spring from his freshly broken nose. When he open his eyes again, rage turned to fear as he saw Ryuko shift into her Royal ensemble and drop her ‘ordinary woman’ guise, hair aglow, eyes burning with fury, luminous wings extending beyond her shoulders. All the lights in the room, even that from outside, seemed to fade in comparison to her.

Ryuko pressed the button that dropped the desk into the ground, then stood up and strode over to where Joseph sat, cringing as the blood dripped onto his suit and sank in. “Who the fuck do you think you are? You seriously thought you could come in here, threaten *my daughter* to my face, and get away with it? Who did you think was going to pull the trigger, you?”

“No! I-I didn’t!”

“Save your ‘just so you know’ shtick for the next sap,” Ryuko said, dragging him by the collar over towards the window. At this moment the translator, who must have also doubled as a secret service

bodyguard, burst into the office. He had a handgun squeezed tight in his fingers, aiming it in a competent looking way at Ryuko.

“P-Put him down!”

Ryuko couldn't help but grin, this was an interesting turn. “Whoa, how'd you get that past the guards!” She exclaimed, then said to Joseph, “See? Now here's a guy with balls! He's willing to kill ‘The Girl who Saved the World’ and cause a whole huge international incident just to save you. Shit, I shoulda been talking to him all along.” Joseph went right on groaning from the pain in his nose and the big, purple bruise that was swiftly forming on his forehead, so she turned back on the guard and said, “Well go ahead, do it.”

The translators beefy, muscular hands trembled on the pistol grip. This was of course the first time he'd seen Ryuko, in person, in her full glory and he immediately thought, *Stupid, stupid! What did I think I was going to do with this!* “Just put him down!” He could not bring himself to fire. Just one look at her radiant beauty in comparison to his sniveling charge and he thought, *This is so wrong, how could my life have lead to this!*

Ryuko sighed in a long, aggravated way. “Fine. I guess he's not *that* brave. Doesn't matter anyway, guns don't work on me. Sit tight, I guess,” Ryuko flicked her hand out at the translator and before Joseph's eyes a web of those same life-fiber threads leapt from it and wrapped around him, cocooning his body like a vest and pinning him against the wall. He shouted in shock before Ryuko extended his thread cocoon to cover his mouth. “Now, you wanted me to put him down?”

Joseph's eyes went wide, “No, No!” And Ryuko put her fist through the window at top speed, shattering it to pieces. He kicked uselessly as Ryuko held him up and hoisted him out into the open air. Below, the plaza was dizzyingly small, more than a hundred stories below. All Joseph could do was scream. “NO! NO! I'M SORRY! I'M SORRY!” He strained his voice with repeated screams.

“That's nice,” Ryuko said, before letting him go. He dropped like a stone, arms flailing roughly, and Ryuko had enough time watching his body grow smaller and smaller to think. *Oh man, Satsuki's gonna be pissed. And here I was doing really good, but he says one thing that's just a bit too far and boom.* But then she thought about the idea of that wretched man ordering the death of her daughter – she pictured the vision of her that Senketsu had conjured – and it came flooding back. *Should I even bother catching him? If I don't, we'll have to fight his country not eventually but tomorrow. And there will just be another guy just like him to take his place.* She sighed. “Alright, fuck it.”

Joseph Galton had nearly struck the ground when suddenly Ryuko was hovering right above him. She grabbed his collar and stopped his fall with a jerk that shot through his body and took the breath out of him. Immediately his terrified screaming was cut off, and when the air sucked into his lungs and he opened his eyes he realized that Ryuko had never really intended to kill him.

“Ah... agh...” He groaned wordlessly, cringing away and holding his hands in front of his face. Ryuko smirked. Yes, just as she'd thought, under his pretensions he was a twerpy kid. She'd dealt with worse.

Ryuko's eyes burned into him, and she spat, “Do you really shoot little refugee kids with a machine gun? Think maybe they felt like this?” Joseph was still too shocked to respond, so she went on. “This is what happens when you make threats,” Ryuko said in a low voice, “Imagine what'll



happen if you actually try something.” She dropped Joseph the remaining five feet to the ground, where he landed in a heap and immediately began sobbing. “Get the fuck out of my country.”

As Ryuko floated off two guards emerged from the building and began to slowly lead the American prince away, half walking him and half dragging. She was hoping to feel more satisfaction than this, finally putting that twerp in his place. But calm didn’t come, why was that? It was like she’d momentarily felt a burst, a reminder, of that horrible emotion she’d felt watching Ragyo’s memories. At the moment when Ragyo’s love for Satsuki died. Something worse than loss, she didn’t know what to call it, but Ryuko had hoped nothing in her own life would ever make her feel that way.

~~~~~

“I wanted to kill him,” Ryuko said.

Nonon raised an eyebrow and said, “Well shit Ryuko, you nearly did. Not that I can say I blame you.” They were back in the recording studio in Nonon’s apartment, Ryuko nervously pacing around, Nonon sitting in the big, comfy swivel chair she used while editing in the control room.

“I was doing fine, I thought, I felt like I had some snappy little lines in there and maybe I looked really sophisticated,” Ryuko huffed, “But then one little thing and *bam!* Beat him up like I was back in high school – you know let me tell you, he can blabber on about ‘oh how hard it was, growing up in a war’,” She turned her voice to a nasal, mocking tone, “But that is one guy who wasn’t bullied enough as a kid!”

“Ryuko -,”

“God, what am I gonna tell Satsuki?”

“You’ll *tell* her what happened, and then she’ll tell you what we should do next. It’s pretty simple,” Ryuko looked over with angry eyes, plainly not believing that, and Nonon sighed and said, “Here, sit down.” She motioned, and Ryuko sat, “Take this,” She put a guitar in Ryuko’s hands and said, “Now play.”

Ryuko rolled her eyes, but she did like the appeal. Yes, that was how a real musician like Nonon dealt with these feelings. She started working through some basic warm-ups that had become muscle memory to her.

Nonon said, “You really think Satsuki’s going to be pissed about this? You know how much your baby means to her. If she was in the room, you don’t think she’d have basically the same reaction?”

“Sats has self-control,” Ryuko shook her head.

“So she’d have killed him later!” Nonon said, and then “No, you got the chord progression backwards there. Do it again.” Ryuko did, and she nodded in satisfaction and said, “So what’s the big deal anyway? You scared that shitheel good, but aside from that the outcome’s basically the same as everyone expected.”

“No. You didn’t see this guy. I went too far. When he recovers... I don’t know what he might do. Maybe he really will decide that another of me is just too dangerous, you know?”

Nonon laughed, “Then fuck him! You wanted to kill him anyway. You aren’t really scared a person like – or even one of his assassins – could get past *us*, are you?”

“No, but...”

“Ryuko c’mon, it’s no good beating yourself up about this. You’ve got a temper, everyone knows that. So you lost it today, so what? We’ll get through the consequences, and if you really want you can take this as a lesson in playing it cool in the future.”

“But the one time is bad enough. I mean look at this, look at the headlines online,” She finished the warm-up she was playing and took out her phone. “ ‘Queen Ryuko throws American Heir out a One-hundred-twentieth Story Window’ it’s already all over there!”

“But that’s badass though!” Nonon said. Ryuko didn’t laugh at that so she threw up a hand and said, “You know what? I’m gonna get Uzu up here, if you don’t believe me.”

In a couple minutes Uzu appeared at the door just as he had that morning, “What’s up?”

“You gotta hear this,” Nonon waved him in, and Ryuko related to him the events of her meeting with Galton.

When she got to the end, Uzu whistled and said, “You know, I’d be lying if I said this kind of behavior isn’t par for the course. Remember when I went over to America, and they nearly killed me in my hotel room? But they’re cowards at heart too.”

Ryuko nodded and dejectedly said, “Yeah, I know.” Nonon rolled her eyes and Ryuko added, “No, really, I get it. This isn’t the end of the damn world, I know.”

“She’s more upset that she flew off the handle at all, not because of consequences or whatever,” Nonon leaned over and whispered to Uzu.

“Oh. Yeah, you haven’t really had a classic ‘Ryuko rage’ moment in a while, have you?” Uzu asked, and Ryuko shook her head no. “Well, uh, I guess I didn’t even think of that. I just kind of thought it was a good thing.”

“Oh yeah?” Ryuko asked.

“Hell yeah. If everyone reacted like that to guys like him the world would be a better place. And if you’re worried about what the public opinion might be, I wouldn’t. For most of them that’s what they want you to do, to say ‘fuck you, we’re not playing by your rules anymore’ to the rest of the world,” Uzu crossed his arms confidently and said, “No way you’ve got an anger management problem or anything just because of this one – pretty damn justified – incident.”

Ryuko smiled, “Thanks. It did feel pretty good. I only don’t like it because, you know...” She looked down at her belly. “What kind of mother could do a thing like that? If I did it again, what kind of example would I be setting?”

Nonon blinked, “Well, that’s you.”

“Yeah Ryuko,” Uzu said, “I mean, it was him threatening to go after Nozomi that set you off, after all. You ever hear those stories about moms who lifted a car to save their kid or something? It’s like that.”

“And besides, if she’s anything like you, I’m sure Nozomi would think you were amazing for what you did today.”

“Right?” Uzu agreed with a smile, “I was thinking too, when she hears our stories about what we’ve done, all our adventures, imagine what that would be like as a little kid. Really think about how you would’ve felt. I don’t really think there’s anything you could do that would make for a bad example when we saved the world. It’s a lot of pressure to stack up, maybe, but if she’s anything like you *or* Satsuki she’ll rise to it no problem. Oh! You’ll let me teach her Kenjutsu when she’s old enough, right?”

That didn’t really help Ryuko much, honestly, but she couldn’t help but smile. *Even these two, Nonon who’s usually so cynical and Uzu who’s usually off in his own world, they’re already getting attached to Nozomi.* After a long afternoon where she could imagine nothing but how her poor little girl would spend her entire childhood dodging assassinations and living the same kind of spoiled yet permanently disrupted life that Joe Galton had, it was nice to remember that she too would always have the rest of their family to rely on.

## Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be a "Matoi Homestead" one that directly follows up on this. It was going to be the end of this one but I want to give it room to breathe (Plus this week's been crazy, I just didn't get it done). I like Ryuko and Satsuki being cute, after all, and I have a feeling most of my readers do too.

## Matoi Homestead 2

August 2068

~~~~~

Satsuki was starting dinner as Ryuko arrived. She could feel her approach through her life-fiber clothing, a sort of magnetic pressure that faintly signaled her position. Satsuki set the stove to a low simmer as Ryuko landed with a barely audible clicking of shoes on the cottages front step, thinking *We have a lot to talk about, I'm sure. I might not be able to get right back to this.*

But when she saw Ryuko, slouching through the door with a flat expression on her face, Satsuki thought differently. The day had taken a major toll on Ryuko, not at all physically but certainly mentally. Still, Ryuko's eyes immediately softened when they met Satsuki's, and as they embraced a sweet, soft smile warmed her face. *Yes, that's right. Let me make it all better.*

"Hey. Sorry I made you come over here in such a rush."

"Think *nothing* of it," Satsuki answered emphatically.

"I just don't feel like dealing with all the people. Not today," Ryuko murmured into Satsuki's shoulder.

"I know. I get it. It's hard, keeping up our composure all the time, isn't it?" Satsuki asked. She couldn't tell if Ryuko was just reminded of what had happened that day or if she thought it was an intentional reference, but she tensed up a bit and looked at Satsuki with a mild amount of panic.

"Listen, Sats, about – ,"

But Satsuki pressed a finger to her lips and said, "You don't have to talk about it if you want. Now, later, never, I don't mind." And Ryuko looked so relieved by that Satsuki thought she might cry. She knew it was all part of the necessary process of getting Ryuko acclimated to handling diplomatic matters on her own, finding her "voice" so to speak. *But I also knew that process would be tough for her sometimes. She shouldn't have to do this. But I guess it's too late now.*

"Thanks," Ryuko hugged her even tighter, "I think I'm just gonna go lay down in the living room, watch something relaxing." She sniffed the air, "What's cooking? Sweet potatoes?"

"That sounds like a good idea. A nature documentary, maybe?" Satsuki said.

"Yeah," That did sound nice, Ryuko decided. They parted, and Satsuki showed her what she was working on in the kitchen.

"And yes, it's roast sweet potatoes and chicken in the oven, and then a soup to go along with it. Oh! Take these, I've been munching on them all afternoon," She grabbed large, half-eaten bag of mixed nuts off the counter and passed. "Just don't eat too many now, especially the almonds. Too many almonds gives you stomach cramps."

Ryuko chuckled, “I think I’ve got an uncrampable stomach though.”

“Oh sure, *you* do. But what about her?” Satsuki said with a smug little smile, running her hand over Ryuko’s belly. If it were anyone else, Ryuko would have swatted her hand away (Well, maybe not Mako, but Ryuko had to make up her mind not to). But with Satsuki it was something different. Intimate, safe, comforting.

“Yeah well, I’m pretty good at telling what she’s ‘asking for’ by now I think. She’s not in the mood for almonds either.”

~~~~~

The documentary Ryuko ended up choosing was about the Pacific Northwest of North America, areas like Canada, Alaska, and Oregon. It was old too, and Ryuko decided not to think about if these places still looked so pristine. Instead, she just gently settled into the couch, hit play on Satsuki’s laptop (the cottage still didn’t have a TV) and began picking through the bag for walnuts, macadamias, and brazil nuts – the ones she actually wanted.

And it was as relaxing as she’d hoped. She’d been feeling restless all day and that didn’t dissipate right away, but she started to feel a bit more peaceful by and by. Orcas and salmon sliding through deep green waters, bears and eagles combing rocky shores – this was a cool and comfortable looking place. She’d begun watching nature documentaries frequently over the last couple months. Satsuki was right when she said it was very important that their daughter appreciated nature, and besides she ought to learn more about the world she protected, right? *I could watch this with Nozomi*, she thought, *definitely more my speed than Shiro’s tutoring sessions*.

Going to the lab to watch her friends spar and absorb more life-fibers was an integral part of Ryuko’s life, but as much as she tried to integrate lessons about science and history from Shiro or Houka or their kamui or whoever was around into that schedule it was always a drag. So much scope and complexity to everything, and to think that all these creatures had their own complicated evolutionary origins, their own stories. It made her head spin. But presented like this, all that compartmentalized information became one beautiful whole. This was how the world seemed to her in her true form too.

Through a tangled web of radial, multidimensional eyes the living world was one huge being, webbed together by its own life force. Through her human eyes that web became the struggles of life and death, predators and prey, courtship and raising young. It all fit together, seemingly for no other reason than the spectacle itself. Yes, even the hunting and death, gruesome and unfair though it was, that was all part of the cosmic pattern of it. Thanks to her perspective on the universe Ryuko saw that on a scale that would make even a veteran ecologist look emotionally invested.

Until she got to the scene with dead sea lion pup, that was.

It was a twisted black blob on the hard rocks. Waves crashed around it, kicking up salt spray over big, black, unseeing eyes on a head bent almost upside-down. And as if that weren’t already a hard enough sight, there was its mother crouched above it. She, in her equal parts dopey and utterly soulful way, kept prodding it. And when the narrator gently described how she would remain there for days, guarding her pup even as it decayed before her, it was impossible not to read profound loss in that vacant face. No, more than that, it was a kind of confused desperation. As if that shattered body would wake up and start moving at any second, if only she just waited a moment longer.

Ryuko was tearing up before she even realized it. But when she took a deep breath and it came out as a wet sniffle she muttered, “Ah, *hell*.”

Satsuki heard her sniffing from the other room and crossed over the hallway. She stood behind the couch Ryuko was laying across and quickly saw exactly what had happened. Her sympathy, obviously, went out to Ryuko. But tinged with a bit of frustration. This was not the first time this had happened. So, she just said, “You’re hormonal,” as though simply explaining what was happening would help.

But the look on Ryuko’s face was so distraught that Satsuki immediately slapped herself. Literally too; she put a hand to her temple, eyes downcast in shame. “I’m sorry!” Satsuki exclaimed, quickly rushing around the couch and scooping Ryuko up into a hug, “I wasn’t thinking.”

Ryuko, for her part, let Satsuki sink down beside her and wrapped her arms around her, clutching her tightly. She resisted breaking out into tears, instead making a noise halfway between a mewl and a frustrated growl into Satsuki’s chest. *What’s wrong with me? Get it under control Ryuko!* She chastised herself as she said, “No, no you’re right, it’s stupid.”

“No. No love, not at all. It’s just you and me, you can let it all out,” Satsuki said gently while rubbing Ryuko’s back, pulling her still closer. She could feel Ryuko give up and let the tension rush out of her body, and then the tears came.

Ryuko cried softly for a while, all her pent-up emotions from the day draining out. “It’s just...look at her,” She waved a hand towards the laptop screen, “She’s got nothing else in the world. And you know what’s the worst part? She doesn’t even *know*! Th-the stupid thing can’t even understand what happened, she still thinks there’s something she can *do*!”

“I know-,”

“-I mean, what kind of fucking world!” Ryuko dissolved into another bout of quiet, ashamed sobs. Somehow no matter what she said it felt horribly inadequate.

“It’s horrible, isn’t it? They should put some kind of warning up before showing things like this,” Satsuki said earnestly. To her relief, that made Ryuko smile – thin and weak, but genuine.

“Nah, don’t be silly,” Ryuko sniffed, “I wouldn’ta paid attention to that.” It really was just a nature show in the end, and with her power, if she wanted, she probably could make that warning a reality. Other people shouldn’t have to deal with that just because a dead baby animal hit a little too close to home for the queen one night. They sat there watching silently for a few minutes more (the dinner wasn’t burning – Satsuki set it to a low heat just to keep it warm). Eventually Ryuko added, “ ‘s sweet, though.”

Satsuki hummed in response and said, “I am sorry I recommended this too. It’s not all bad, but I guess I forget how much death is in these shows. Our cold, cruel, beautiful world. But that’s why we have each other, hmm?” She kissed Ryuko, first on the forehead and then, after Ryuko sniffed and managed to still her tears, on the lips. “Speaking of, you know what will make you feel better? Some dinner. Here, it’s ready, let me go get it.”

“Well, wait,” Ryuko murmured, tugging Satsuki’s sleeve to keep her from leaving. Satsuki sat back down and Ryuko shifted to a more upright position, looked her in the eyes and said, “I know you said we don’t have to talk about what happened today if I don’t want to. But I guess I kind of do.”

Satsuki responded with her own quiet amusement, saying, “Well, it sure took a lot to wring that out of you. What, you think I didn’t notice how much grief it’s giving you?”

“Haha. So, how much did you hear?”

“Oh, everything. Nonon called me while you were on your way over,” Satsuki answered smugly.

“Of course she did,” Ryuko rolled her eyes.

“And I also watched the security footage so…”

“Oh. Well uh, shoot,” That answer – so typically, methodically Satsuki - had Ryuko second guessing if she really wanted to have this conversation now. Like Nonon had said, all there was to do was tell Satsuki what happened and then she would decide what to do next. A discussion about diplomacy and tactics was not what Ryuko wanted right now. Satsuki knew that, but could she help herself? “I guess all I can say’s I’m sorry then.”

“Sorry?” Satsuki exclaimed, a bit ashamed that Ryuko even felt the need to apologize to her, “For what?”

“C’mon, Sats, don’t make me say it,” Ryuko groaned.

“That’s *not* what I meant. I’m the one who should be apologizing to you. No, really! And not just because I should’ve been there, either,” She squeezed Ryuko’s hand to show her she meant it.

“Well, I still fucked up though,” Ryuko said. “Right?”

“Not even as much as you think. See this is what I mean. I should have told you before, but the truth is you were within your rights to forcibly remove him from the country. Any diplomat who makes such an overt threat is basically opening themselves up to being kicked out of the country and having their diplomatic status revoked. Even if they’re declaring war, they’re not supposed to do that. I should have told you that before, but I *really* didn’t think he would have the nerve. I’m still kind of amazed, but I guess that when you’ve grown up as the heir to the most powerful country on Earth you don’t think anyone would dare call you on your bullshit.”

That made Ryuko chuckle morosely, “Yeah, I kinda got that vibe.”

“So there you go. And if he got a little banged up on the way out, then he must have resisted, right?”

“Well, not that much,” Ryuko shrugged, “He obviously didn’t want to get tossed out the window, but ‘snot like he could do anything about it.”

Satsuki hum-chuckled, “No, no what I mean is that what we’re going to *say* is that he resisted, right?”

Ryuko’s mouth curled into a silent “oh”, and she finally cracked a grin, “I gotcha. Yeah, he pitched a whole huge bitch-fit. What else was I gonna do?”

Satsuki laughed with her and said, “See, there you have it. In the end, he left you with no other option. Now, that *has* to make you feel a bit better, no?”

“It does,” Ryuko said, and to prove it she stretched, rolling herself to lean across Satsuki’s chest with her legs up on the couch. Not that she didn’t always love “dogpiling” Satsuki, but there was something about it the last few months that felt so much closer. “I thought you’d be mad.”

“Oh, I *am*,” Satsuki said with a smirk and drop in her voice, “But not at you. In fact, to be completely honest, it bothers me a little bit that I might not have reacted that way.” She ran her fingers through Ryuko’s hair, “You know, I’m so glad we started treating your hair like mine.”

Ryuko shrugged, leaned back so Satsuki’s fingers could sweep through more cleanly. “Doesn’t even look any different.”

“Oh, but it feels so much silkier. Plus,” She pressed her face into the top of Ryuko’s head, “It smells nice too.” She sniffed again this time just in Ryuko general direction, “Actually, today you smell like the soap from Nonon’s.”

“Wonder why,” Ryuko giggled.

“Do people smell bad, to you? I’ve always kind of imagined that you can cut right through perfumes and soaps and get at all the greases and pheromones and dirt we’re all swimming in.”

“You smell great,” Ryuko answered.

“Well, that was never in question.”

“Nah, it’s like, people smell like people. Not good or bad, mostly. Oh, I can smell when people sweat though. You wanna know who sweat fuckin’ bullets? That bodyguard – translator guy,” Ryuko grinned in spite of herself – the sheer surprise of him pulling a gun was a highlight of the day. “What’s going to happen to him now?”

“Well, he’s in prison at the moment,” Satsuki answered, “He drew a weapon against you, it’s not just attempted murder but political aggression, so by rights he is an enemy combatant and can be killed. If that’s what you *really* want.”

“Good that it ain’t then,” Ryuko said, “I don’t think it counts when everyone knows guns don’t work on me. So, I guess maybe in my opinion it’s more like he slapped me, or something.”

Satsuki nodded, “That’s good. In the end though the courts will decide, and even with that I really don’t think they’ll ever let him leave the country. Depending what testimony you decide to give he might be able to live his days out in relative comfort, though still high security.” She patted Ryuko and said, “We might even try to deprogram him, but that’s a problem for another day.”

“It’s fucked up though that a guy with some actual guts to him winds up working for such a just total worm. I mean, I know you warned me and stuff but the things he said! These people! I guess I just didn’t really believe it until I saw,” Ryuko exclaimed. The things she really meant weren’t his threats, but the other stuff. The “REVOCS are mere insurrectionaries,” the “Fighting insurrections is just part of ruling, stuff like that. Satsuki hummed in agreement and Ryuko went on, “I mean, do they even know what we did for them? Do they even care?”

“No, they don’t care,” Satsuki said, firm and certain. “I’m sure they’re thankful enough that we saved the world, but they’d like us a lot better if after that we just sort of faded into obscurity and let the status quo march on. A status quo that will kill the world just the same, only slower.”



“Yeah,” Ryuko said with a fixed smile. Confident, but only because in the face of that all that she had to be. She broke through the remaining flem left in her voice from crying and stridently said, “Well fuck that. We aren’t going anywhere, are we?”

“No. And if we can spite men like him as we do it, all the better,” Satsuki agreed in the same tone. For her that confidence was not at all forced. That was kind of amazing, really.

Only there was something else Joe Galton had said that was still rattling around in Ryuko’s mind. “Yeah, better for us,” She said, looking away from Satsuki but not at anything else in particular. Satsuki stayed quiet, but Ryuko could feel an unasked question boring through the back of her head. “Just, nevermind, okay? In the end all I can say is I shoulda taken Nonon’s advice and just postponed it. Today of all days I really wasn’t ready for it.”

*Well, that’s not gonna reassure Satsuki,* Ryuko kicked herself internally. And Satsuki asked, “Why today, of all days?”

Ryuko sighed and mumbled, “I’ve been kinda startin’ to feel her moving. Started a couple days ago, but I guess it really ramped up last night.”

Satsuki gasped. Her eyes went wild with wonder, and she immediately whisked a hand over to Ryuko’s middle. Despite herself Ryuko cracked a smile and giggled ticklishly. “No, no! I don’t think you can feel it yet. Just me. I dunno if even a normal human could feel it.”

“But still, that’s wonderful! Just one step closer, soon this will be over and we’ll be a real family, hmm?” Satsuki gushed. “What does it feel like?”

“I dunno, it feels how it feels! Who cares?” Ryuko said suddenly and loudly. Satsuki looked taken aback. “See, this is why I didn’t even want to bring up in the first place. Because you’d get all excited and I’m just...”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get caught up in it, I know how... *different* this is from how you thought having children would go. I know you mostly just want this over with, it’s okay,” She said.

Ryuko sat up, “What? No, that ain’t it at all. More like the exact opposite.” Ryuko felt like she might start crying all over again and she said, “I can’t just pretend it’s nothing anymore. I can’t just kind of keep it just an abstract like ‘eventually I’ll be a mom’ thing. It’s happening now. And I knew it would happen, but still I wasn’t ready.”

Wow. *That* was a lot for Satsuki to take it. Though it was not what she had expected, she’d gotten used to the idea that Ryuko would mostly gripe her way through the pregnancy even up until the last moment, that it was what came after that she was excited for. It had its charms. But now the situation had become horribly real to Ryuko. How could she reach out, make it better for her? “You have her life in your hands. Yours alone. I can understand why it’s so hard.” Satsuki pulled Ryuko close again, there could be no space between them. That was something she could do for Ryuko, after all.

“No, no you can’t. I don’t mean that badly it’s just,” Ryuko paused to think of exactly how she wanted to say it, “You don’t know what it’s like, laying awake at night, thinking what would you do if she *stopped* moving!”

“It’ll get easier.”

“Yeah, you don’t know that,” Ryuko huffed, and then said, “Well it’s true.”

Satsuki pressed on, “And so what if it is? Even if it doesn’t get easier, it’s not that much longer now, and you know you can always wake me on those hard nights when you need.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Ryuko sighed. Once Nozomi was hybridized like Ryuko that danger was over and they would have no worries, right? Ryuko wished she could have that kind of optimism right now. “But... I don’t know where to start.” Satsuki rubbed her back as she waited for Ryuko to organize her thoughts. “Like, I think of that guy, Galton. He was someone’s kid once. And what he was saying about how he grew up, he never had a chance to be a child, he was always being rushed around between safe houses and trained up so he could rule one day. And then so, so spoiled on the other hand, like told he was superior to everyone else. I mean with a life like that, who can be surprised he turned out to be a total douche!”

Satsuki frowned, and Ryuko went on. “You see what I mean, right? How’s that any different from what Nozomi’s childhood’s gonna be like? Only *he’s* gonna be one of the people trying to kill her!”

Satsuki very emphatically said, “It *will* be different, Ryuko. You know she’ll be safe from things like that. Trust in our friends, the hybridization will work.”

“That won’t stop them from trying though. You remember that time when those REVOCS assassins snuck into my room? They knew how to kill me. If I weren’t a light sleeper, they really could’ve done it. And we’re gonna make our girl have to live with that?”

“Ryuko...” Satsuki started. Ryuko might have pressed on with her rant, but she stopped and Satsuki said, “This is – it’s actually kind of funny to me because these are the sorts of worries I guess I kind of thought you would have from the start. Only, I guess you could say I was fantasizing about it, like, you would come crying to me and I would make it all better,” She chuckled to herself.

“Well, it does sound nice,” Ryuko said, snuggling up closer to her, “This is a start.”

“That’s good. But the thing is, I don’t know what to tell you. I wish I had the magic words but that’s just not how this works, I see that now.” She put a hand to her chest, “I can’t just tell you that there won’t be political enemies out to get her, it’s not true, and I can’t tell how slim the chances are they’ll even get close. They are, but that isn’t good enough, is it? For you it has to be absolute.” Ryuko thought about it for a second, and then nodded. “Well, if someone has to sleep with one eye open for her, let it be us. We’ll be like a momma bear until she’s old enough to fend for herself, hmm? And the truth is, by then if she’s anything like us she’ll relish the challenge.”

“Yeah, ‘like us’. Why’s she got to be like us? Nonon said the same thing before,” Ryuko shot back. “Why can’t she be like Mako, or hell any other way she wants to be.”

“Ryuko. I *want* her to be like us,” Satsuki said with a frown, “What’s wrong with that? I want to teach her about martial arts and history. Don’t you want to show her your favorite movies, your favorite songs? Aren’t you proud of how you’ve always stuck up for people like the Mankanshokus? I know I want her to have that same moral compass.”

Ryuko said, “Well sure, that’s not what I meant. I mean, when you say stuff like that, you mean she’s got to be a fighter like us. She’s got to always have a battle ahead of her. She’s got to have that *want* to win.” Ryuko was hesitant, *Sats will understand if I say it right, but I just have to do that first.* “That’s the sort of thing that’s so terrible, because we’re just now winning against

REVOCS, and here comes another war and more people who want to kill us. If it doesn't stop, she'll have to live the way we did. And that'll be on us."

"I see," Satsuki's frown deepened, only this time in thought. She put a hand on her chin and said, "We really are in quite a bind then. Our only choice is to shut this America conflict down before it really starts."

"Yeah. But that wouldn't fix it all either. Because what if she did turn out like us in that way, only there was no fight coming for her? Couldn't she turn out almost like how you used to be? Which ain't really that different from how that Galton guy is. Or how *she* was."

Satsuki didn't know what to say to that. So instead, they had dinner, and Satsuki told the far less eventful and more pleasant story of her day (she'd spent it at the lab, working on her various projects and watching Aikuro try to explain to Nekketsu how to read a scientific paper). And they managed to forget all about Ryuko's troubled thoughts for a while.

~~~~~

Ryuko headed to bed ahead of Satsuki, exhausted after a long day. She meant to lay there playing a game on her laptop and listening to the faint noises of Satsuki working on her dissertation, but soon enough she nodded off. Probably a couple hours later Ryuko was dimly aware of Satsuki quietly entering the room, felt her lifting the covers around her to free up a spot for her, and then opened her eyes to see Satsuki oh-so-quietly and slowly undressing, languidly lifting the top of her life-fiber outfit over her head, exposing skin inch by inch.

Ryuko said, "You gotta stop doing that."

"Doing what?" Satsuki asked, head still inside her shirt.

"Well not being all coy, you know what you're doing," Ryuko smirked. Satsuki just grunted, both because she was trying to free her head without wrinkling the shirt and to pretend she didn't know what Ryuko meant. So Ryuko lurched up and, as quietly as she could, holding her hands up in preparation to grab Satsuki. "Look at you. Usually I'd take this opportunity to feel ya up, and you'd act all indignant, same old script. Only now you know I'm too top-heavy, so even if I want, I can't *pounce!* -Whuhaaa!"

Ryuko cut herself off with an undignified yelp, and Satsuki yelped too, because at that moment she tried to pounce on Satsuki from behind and grope her chest, but her prediction was proven totally right. She misjudged the force she needed and slammed her head directly between Satsuki's shoulders, tumbling them both down off the edge of the bed. Only Ryuko engaged her levitation and stopped, leaving her floating horizontal. She just barely managed to snag Satsuki and soften her fall too.

"Ryuko! What on Earth possessed you to -," Satsuki rolled over and glared at Ryuko. But that instantly softened when she saw the big, goofy grin on Ryuko's face.

"See what I mean?" Ryuko laughed, and Satsuki couldn't help but laughing too. Now Ryuko didn't hesitate to dig her fingers into Satsuki's flesh and then slowly float herself down onto her, straddling her waist.

"Oof! You're heavy!" Satsuki exclaimed.

“Hehehe, now you can’t run,” Ryuko chortled.

“Who said I wanted to?” Satsuki asked, and when Ryuko kissed her she sighed with a contented, “Mmmm.” They laid on the floor for a while, kissing and gently exploring each other’s bodies, but soon enough the hardwood boards were beginning to dig into Satsuki’s shoulder and hips. And Ryuko – who was truly exhausted – began to slow down.

“Ryuko?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re gonna fall asleep on me now?”

Ryuko looked at her through heavy lidded eyes. Satsuki could tell what she really needed was sleep, but when she had that look on it was hard to resist rousing her again. “Mm-mm. I wanna fuck you,” She murmured sleepily.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere. There’s always tomorrow,” Satsuki gave her a light slap on the cheek, “Now cmon, up into bed before you crush my pelvis.”

“Jerk,” Ryuko chuckled, sliding off Satsuki, “This’s how you treat your pregnant wife?”

“No, this is how I do it,” The moment Satsuki was free, she dexterously rose into a crouch and scooped Ryuko up, placing her on the bed and fixing the covers around her before joining her.

“Ahhh,” Ryuko stretched out. “Much better.” After Satsuki got herself nestled in close, Ryuko said, “Hey, real quick? Was Rei or anyone mad at what I did today? I mean, it’d make sense.”

“Rei was... frustrated. But only partly at you. We all know you reacted in pretty much the only way you could. And in the end, it probably didn’t affect the outcome at all. And it’s not all bad either, stocks for a bunch of American arms manufacturers went way up because they expect war. You know, gun factories?”

“Mhm, I’m listenin’,” Ryuko said without bothering to open her eyes.

“Well guess what country owns lots of shares in those companies.”

“Pfft. Nice.”

“So it seems like your choice is helping us even as it hurts us,” Satsuki said. “So don’t worry about a thing. It’ll all work out.”

“Mmm, I wish I had that kind of confidence,” Ryuko murmured. “It’s all so complicated.”

“Well, that’s what you have me for, eh? Oh, speaking of,” Satsuki sat up, “I’ve got some ‘fall asleep’ reading for you. Here,” She reached across Ryuko to the night-table where her bag was sitting. Without a top on, she just about smothered Ryuko while attempting to fish out one book from among the stack of them packed tight in them.

Ryuko’s eyes went wide as she tried to struggle out from underneath, “Okay now you’re taunting me, for real!”

“I know, how cruel of me,” Satsuki smirked. “Here, look,” She showed Ryuko the small nonfiction book she’d selected. A parenting book with a simplistic graphic of a person with what looked like a little explosion going off in their head, “It’s about dealing with difficult children. The author has another about aggression and antisocial behavior in particular.”

“And these are some of the best ones?”

“I should think so, the author has like, twenty children. She must know what she’s doing.”

“Twenty? The fuck, seriously?” Ryuko asked, interest suddenly piqued. What sort of weirdo was that?

“No,” Satsuki said with a hum-chuckle. “She has like three.”

“Ohh my *god*,” Ryuko rolled her eyes.

“Got you again. But in any case, I think if I read that I’d be able to deal with your worries well, right?”

“Yeah. That’d be great. I’ll leave it all to you. You don’t mind that, right?”

“You must be joking.”

Ryuko managed to stay up a little longer, listening to Satsuki read and thinking about all the little things Satsuki must have been planning. How to make sure Nozomi grew up right. After all, surely someone like Joe Galton didn’t have such a wise and passionate mother, how could Nozomi turn out anything like that? That was more than enough security for now.

# The Real Monsters

## Chapter Summary

By way of explanation, not excuse: My work's been very busy lately, I've had a wisdom tooth that had to get yanked, and we're starting to get into some of the more conceptually complex chapters where I really have to try and make them as quality as possible. So with that in mind I am terribly sorry but for the next while my schedule is going to be "when it gets done." Quality is more important on these last, end of the part chapters.

September 2068

~~~~~

Something was wrong at the Matoi mansion. Wakaiketsu could sense that even before she landed, the auras from within were practically screaming at her. Ryuko's especially, it was huge and overwrought, a torrent of emotion. It seemed like she was thrashing about, completely at a loss for what to do. Lost to rage, but with nothing to direct it at. It was unthinkable to Mataro, just picturing it.

*[Oh my god, is someone dead?]* She immediately jumped into a panic. Mataro wasn't far behind her. They knew Houka, Shiro, and Aikuro had been over for dinner before, but they were all there. *Satsuki*, where was Satsuki? They were still high in the air – Wakaiketsu had developed her flight form by turning her cloak into a set of hang-glider like wings, underneath which on Mataro's back sat a set of thrusters. They banked into a steep dive, and Wakaiketsu urgently strained to feel for Satsuki's life-fiber outfit. *[Please, please let her be alright!]*

Oh wait, there she was.

The relief was only temporary though. Mataro alighted on a back patio, in front of Ryuko's favorite lounge. *[So if it wasn't an assassination attempt, what the hell?]*

"Dunno," Mataro said. "But it got them all scared good. And anything that can scare Ryuko..."

*[Ain't good for the rest of us.]*

Inside, Mataro found his parents sitting, fretful and silent, among a crowd of other residents doing the same. There were some gasps at his arrival, but most people seemed more relieved to see him than anything. And even then, they hardly halted in their worried murmuring to let him pass through.

"Hey boy, good you're here," Barazo said.

"What the hell's going on here, Dad?"

“Some bad shit, that’s all we know,” He shook his head, and Sukuyo nodded seriously. “We were eating dinner, and all of a sudden Ryuko shot up, spat out her food, and then she her fingers down her throat like,” He demonstrated, everything short of actually forcing himself to gag, “and then just started puking!”

Mataro’s jaw dropped, “Holy shit. Poison?”

“Yeah. Looks like, only not for her.” The way his dad said that it was obvious what he meant.

Okay. That Mataro wasn’t expecting, *[No!]*. Wakaiketsu was aghast. Mataro said, “You’re kidding, right? Who would fucking – I mean, it didn’t work, right – I mean, how the fuck could they!?”

“I don’t know. But they’ve been up in Satsuki’s office for like, an hour. They’ll want to see you,” He patted Mataro on the back, “Do what you can.”

“Yeah.” Mataro headed on through the crowd. But before he did, Sukuyo looked really pale. “Hey Mom? You, uh, you good?”

She nodded quietly, “I just can’t believe it. Text me when you find out if Ryuko’s alright, okay?” Mataro didn’t need to answer, of course he would. “And make sure to call Mako too. I have a feeling Ryuko will need her.”

~~~~~

“So, what the fuck?” Mataro said, bursting through the doors to Satsuki’s office. Everyone looked up, but besides that barely acknowledged that he’d arrived. Serious shit indeed. Houka and Shiro were sitting at the desk, lost in thought. Aikuro was beside them in an armchair, hand on his forehead. And then Satsuki.

God, Mataro hadn’t seen that look on her face since the bad old days. The same scowl she wore during their training sessions, but that wasn’t all there was too it. There was a look in her eyes that wasn’t there in the training scowl; murderous intent. She couldn’t stop pacing, barely suppressed rage kept spurring her restlessly on.

“So, where is she?” Mataro demanded.

“Upstairs,” Satsuki answered curtly. “She doesn’t want to see anyone.”

“Oh.” *Of course she doesn’t. What the hell could I even say to her?* “At least, tell me she’s alright, right?”

That made Satsuki’s face soften – as though reminded that other people besides her and her wife were distraught – and she nodded.

“Here, c’mere kid,” Aikuro waved them over. “You’ve heard the broad strokes, right?”

“Yeah,” Mataro answered.

Shiro turned his phone screen to Mataro. There was a medical readout on it, not that Mataro understood. Fortunately, he explained, “The poison slipped right by Ryuko’s food taster. It’s colorless and tasteless and has no effect on anyone who isn’t pregnant.”

“Well, tasteless to an ordinary human,” Aikuro smirked, “That’s what they didn’t count on. Ryuko though caught it on the first bite. ‘Like oil and shampoo’ she described it.”

“We pumped her stomach for good measure. But after a full blood test, she’s clean. Another assassination attempt foiled by her superhuman senses,” Houka added.

Mataro shrugged, “That’s good. But still…”

“I know…”

Satsuki turned her head, acknowledging their conversation for the first time. *[But still, someone has to die for this, don’t they?]* Wakaiketsu said. She was far from shocked. No, this was what everyone was thinking.

And their hard faces confirmed it. “We all know who’s behind this,” Mataro said. “The Americans. Got to be, right?” Nobody spoke, Mataro was half afraid he was getting ahead of himself. But fuck it, he’d heard about Ryuko’s run-in with their prince. No doubt he was behind this. Well, so what if he said what everyone was thinking? “Only question is how did they do it?”

Houka answered, “That is the trouble. We’ve analyzed the security camera footage from the kitchen many times. Nothing out of the ordinary. And the agents who are currently interrogating the kitchen staff haven’t had any luck either. So, we don’t have a definite conclusion about who did this, or how.”

*[Yet. We will find out,]* Misaki added forcefully.

Mataro nodded. Right, these guys would assume nothing. Even if it was the Americans (it was), they had to rule out that it was just REVOCS again first. *[After all, the only reason we’re assuming it’s not just REVOCS again is because REVOCS always lets their assassins get caught. They want to die. It’s kind of like taunting us, saying ‘look at how close to you we can get’,]* Wakaiketsu thought aloud for herself and Mataro.

“So, I guess the real question isn’t who’s behind it, but how they either got a guy in and out of the mansion without anyone noticing or if not that which of the kitchen staff is a traitor.”

“They’d have to be a *real* good liar,” Aikuro nodded. “Frankly, I don’t see it. Satsuki hired most of them herself.”

Mataro weighed it. There really was no obvious explanation. And god, from Ryuko’s perspective that could only make it more horrible. *We probably should just kill that Galton guy preemptively, anyway,* He thought, but that wasn’t very helpful. They were all thinking it. Instead, he offered, “Well, uh, I called Mako, left a message. She must already be on her way.”

“Good. Ira will be coming behind her, I’m sure they’ll stay the night. And Nonon and Uzu are coming too. We’ve told everyone, the others are just as upset but, you know,” Shiro shrugged.

“No, that makes sense. Rei and Tsumugu probably kept their cool a bit better.”

It took a few minutes, but eventually Mako zoomed into view and dropped onto the balcony. She held herself in a ready stance, arms out. “Where is she?” She asked urgently. They all pointed upstairs. “Okay. Sit tight, I’ll, uh,” Mako didn’t exactly have a plan, obviously, but it wasn’t like



she needed one. Before she went to Ryuko, though, Mako bustled in and gave Satsuki a hug. “You doin’ alright?”

Satsuki managed a smile and nodded, “The danger is over. It’s just, she can’t possibly see it that way, can she?” Mako shook her head no. “Truth is, I don’t even know what to say. I just wish...”

“I know. Leave it to me, alright?” Mako walked back out on the balcony. Before she jumped up to the next level, she turned and asked, “You’re all going to get the people who did this, right?” Satsuki nodded, and she frowned. “Alright. I’ll be back down in a bit.”

Mako leapt up, deftly floating over the balcony. They could all hear her knock on the door, Ryuko slowly side it open, but after that only those with enhanced senses could hear the conversation. TheIt didn’t feel right to listen in. And it wasn’t like Ryuko was saying anything the rest of them didn’t feel. How could this have happened? How could they strike right under everyone’s nose like that? How could there be people in the world so monstrous?

So they got back to speculating about how exactly the poison had made its way into Ryuko’s miso soup. It was probably about twenty minutes later that Nonon and Uzu arrived. They dropped onto the balcony and stormed in, not even bothering to power down.

“Alright, who’s the bastard!” Uzu loudly demanded. “It was that Galton guy, wasn’t it? Say the word Satsuki, I’ll fly over there and drag him back tonight! I’ve been needing to get even with his senile old uncle anyway”

“Yeah, we’ve got to strike now!” Nonon agreed. “It’s pretty clear what they’re doing. They’re trying to intimidate Ryuko, show they don’t need to go to war to hit us. So, we’ve got to show *them* that we don’t spook so easily! Doesn’t matter if they’re ‘world leaders’ or whatever, nobody gets to do this to you, to *us*!”

There was a moment of silence while everyone waited to see how Satsuki would respond. Finally, she said, “That isn’t tactically sound.”

“But Satsuki!” Nonon immediately protested.

“You can’t be serious! This is a special case; don’t tell me you don’t want payback!” Uzu added.

“I didn’t *say* that!” Satsuki’s voice cracked loudly, and Uzu and Nonon were both taken aback. “You think this doesn’t cross the line for me? No, those responsible will pay, you *know* I will make sure of that. But how do you think this would be perceived internationally, if we are seen using our powers to kill a head of state and his heir just based on a claim only we have any proof of?”

Uzu didn’t know what to say to that, but Nonon did, “But still. I told Ryuko that we wouldn’t let them get past us. And here we are. At bare minimum, we gotta find out how the hell they did this, and make sure it can *never* happen again.”

Satsuki considered this. And they could hear from upstairs Ryuko saying, “Well how do you know? If there’s a next time, then what if-“ Before being cut off by something Mako was saying. She sounded as close to angry at Mako as she could possibly be. Then, “Oh yeah, that’d be nice! It’s the real fucking world Mako it’s not that easy! ...Yeah I – nnh – no, you’re right, I... didn’t need to swear... I’m sorry...”

“It’s not tactically sound,” Satsuki finally said. “But I will not stop Ryuko from seeking whatever retribution she desires. It’s up to her.”

~~~~~

The kitchen staff were obviously terrified. They were for the most part doing their best to stay stoic, to stand as though at attention in a line in the back of the office. But pick any one of them, and odds are their hands were shaking. Or perhaps their eyes were puffy from crying – maybe from hearing about the incident itself, maybe from the interrogation, maybe from sitting in a closet in the basement for hours wondering if those cold-eyed agents had believed them. And now here they were, in the dead of night, under the cold, unsympathetic eyes of seven of the most important people in the world. One of the waitresses had started crying again, not that any of the rest blamed her

“This’s all of ‘em?” Mataro quietly asked Houka. He and Nonon were leaning over Houka’s laptop as though that would hide them from the staff. But it only made them more afraid of what they could be conspiring.

Houka nodded, “Forty-seven in total. Them, plus all the waiters and waitresses and some maids and maintenance men who were in the dining hall or the kitchens today or yesterday, which is when the ingredients got delivered. They must wish they picked a different day to fix the slow cooker, eh?”

“Or maybe they don’t,” Nonon said, eyes narrowed.

“Tonight’s dinner didn’t even use that. And the poison was in the soup. My money is on someone sneaking a quick pour in, but if they did the cameras miss it.”

“Huhh,” Nonon murmured, “So then what does Ryuko think she’s gonna do about it?”

“Well, maybe they will feel a bit more honest staring her in the face. Especially they’re REVOCS, she does have a habit of making them go ballistic from time to time. It’s possible,” Houka shrugged.

“Yeah, possible,” Shiro agreed with a roll of his eyes, “In the theoretical sense. She just wants to get her own eyes on them, maybe rough the shiftier ones up a bit. Not rational, but knowing Ryuko it’d put her mind at ease a bit just to know we really pressed them as hard as we could.”

“They look a little rough already,” Mataro said snidely, “You sure your boys didn’t already do anything to them?”

Houka frowned and shook his head, and Shiro said, “If we’d narrowed it down to just a few suspects, then yeah we would’ve tortured them a bit. As it stands though, wouldn’t have been worth it.”

Mataro nodded, that was fair enough. “Did, uh, anyone tell her they’re here, by the way?”

At that moment, all the Kamui Corps and Satsuki snapped to alertness. They could feel Ryuko above, rising to her feet, and the presence of Mako and Tonbo beside her. Their reaction wasn’t lost on the ordinary humans in the room – the guards tried to follow their superior officers’ example but couldn’t help but twitch nervously. The kitchen staff too tried to order themselves but

couldn't keep from murmuring breathlessly. They were all sure they were about to see not the Ryuko they knew, but the one they had only heard about on the news. The one all those statues and murals were made for.

And they weren't disappointed. Ryuko strode in as though the doors weren't there. Her face was set in a scowl nearly as hard as Satsuki's, and she'd put together her full regalia. Royal robes, crown, luminous "wings", lights twinkling on the undersides of her hair. The kitchen staff froze with a gasp as her eyes passed over them. Behind her Mako gently shut the door, cheeks a little puffed in determination to look as resolute as Ryuko (it didn't really work).

Mataro and the rest who'd been crowded around the desk backed off, and as they did Nonon whispered, "Wowzers, I kinda figured she was up there crying."

Houka laughed under his breath, "Oho, well you might think that, but you weren't there to see it happen. She didn't retreat up there, Satsuki sent her there to stop her from doing anything *rash*."

"Yeah, I figured," Mataro nodded, "When my Mom told me to get Mako over here, kinda tipped me off. Because Satsuki could cheer her up, but calm her down? In a situation like this?"

"Geez. I thought she was trying to do better about losing her temper," Nonon said, "Not that I can blame her."

"This is better though," Mataro added, "She backed out instead of letting her anger do the talking for her."

While they were having this conversation, Ryuko took Satsuki's hand and softly said, "You 'kay?" Satsuki nodded, and she said – to both her and Mako – "Good. You might wanna look away for this part."

"What are you going to do?" Satsuki asked.

"Something I learned how to do a while ago, but promised myself I never would," When Mako looked worried by that, she added, "It won't hurt them any, don't worry."

How much of that the kitchen staff heard varied from one to another, but they were all frozen either in fright or an effort to stoically accept their fate. Ryuko strode around the desk; now only a long stretch of carpet stood between her and them.

*No, there's no way. I know all of them by name, hell I know all of their **kid's** names!* Ryuko thought as she regarded them. *Satsuki hired each and every one of these people, and she has this whole huge screening process. And besides, they all love me. No, it's not possible. What must have happened is someone snuck in, and maybe one of them saw something and didn't realize it.* Ryuko badly wanted to believe that. *But I could be looking at the person who tried to kill my daughter right now.*

Fuck it. They knew who she was when they applied to work here. If she couldn't complain that her life was the way it was, they couldn't either.

"Let's start with him," Ryuko waved at the young man who had been her waiter that night. Barely more than a teenager and without any muscle or weight on him. Ryuko had met his mother at the Christmas dinner; divorced, moved up to the nearby town with him after he got the

job. He was the last person she'd suspect. But also, the one with the golden opportunity to slip something into her food.

The guards hastily walked him forward and threw him at her feet. He flopped to the ground, looking up at her in total loss. There had to be something, something he could say or do to make her understand he was innocent. "Y-your majesty!" He bawled, "I-I-"

Ryuko crouched down and put a hand on his shoulder, gently straightening his back, "Hey, hey. It's alright. You don't have to tell me anything." He looked relieved, until she said, "I'm really sorry about this."

Too swiftly for him to react, the tip of her index finger unwound itself. A thin web of glowing amber orange threads leapt between her fingers, entwining them and circling back to the little helix that grew from her fingertip. And before everyone's eyes the thread leapt straight to his forehead in a perfect line. So subatomically thin was it that it sunk right through without even a drop of blood.

The waiter went deathly pale. His eyes rolled up into his head, glazed over, and his mouth hung open in slack-jawed shock. His body jerked once and then went completely rigid. The room was immediately seized by uproar, gasps and shouts from the ordinary humans and kamui corps alike. But Ryuko didn't notice any of that. Her eyes were far away, flickering around, looking at something only she could see.

"Holy shit! She mind-stitched him!" Mataro exclaimed.

"That's impossible!" Nonon blurted. "I mean, she can't!"

"And why not?" Houka's response relatively composed and unphased, "Ragyo and Nui were both capable of it. She is the same sort of being."

"Yeah but like, *still!*" Nonon said, glancing over to Satsuki and Mako. Satsuki displayed no reaction – which didn't mean there wasn't one – and Mako just looked a bit disappointed. She must have suspected something like this. Without really looking for it, Nonon's hand found Uzu's and gave it a quick squeeze. "What's gonna happen now?" She asked.

Uzu answered, "Well, uh, I guess she'll know if he was involved now."

It was over moments later. The thread flew out from the young waiter's forehead, and he began to return to life. The color flooded back into him. He slumped forward, stiffness gone. His eyes returned their focus. And then immediately they squeezed shut as he grimaced in pain, slammed a fist to his temple and grunting, "GHAAAH-AAAH!" And he didn't stop either.

Ryuko too returned to herself. For her it was less like returning to life and more like waking up, eyes fluttering briefly before she took in the man before her.

*Oh no, what have I done?*

Ryuko's remorse was obvious. She seemed to sink, shoulders deflating a solid inch. She kept her hand on his shoulder, and he clutched to her wrist as though it were the only real thing in the world. "Easy now, you're alright," She murmured, *What hollow words, huh? I guess I hoped he wouldn't be along for the ride as I scanned through everything he's seen and thought for the past week. Looks like I was wrong.* She wanted to cry, forcing him to go through this. Of course, the

poor boy idolized her, she'd never seen one of those pointless puppy crushes from the other side but she could hardly blame him for it. Not like he was alone. It felt like she had betrayed that adoration. *And they all adore me. I'll have to betray them all before this is done.*

No, she wasn't stopping. It had worked, after all. "He's innocent," Ryuko loudly said, pulling her composure back together. She beckoned the guards back over. But before they took him, Ryuko gave him a kiss on the forehead. She didn't really know why. It just seemed like the least she could do.

The guards (much more carefully than last time) brought him over to an armchair near where the rest of the kitchen staff were standing. He flopped into it, still groaning and clutching his head, sucking in big heaving breaths through gritted teeth. But as everyone watched, he slowly began to recover. And finally, he opened his eyes, back in reality.

The other ordinary humans in the room waited with bated breath. Had his mind survived? What was it like? Was it really okay to let this happen to them? What would they do if it wasn't? Even if they wanted to say, *'No way I'm letting that freaky alien chick probe my brain'*, at this point refusal wasn't an option. That would look like guilt. The only question was, how afraid should they be.

He answered those unspoken questions with a serious nod. "It hurts," He said, "But you have nothing to hide from her." The words had a tone of reverence to them.

The head chef stepped forward. He audibly gulped, balled his fists up, and muttered something under his breath about setting a good example as he approached Ryuko.

~~~~~

It went on for about an hour after that. Each member of the household staff was brought up in their turn, each was briefly mind stitched by Ryuko, then each was declared innocent and sent to sit and recover in a corner.

Some took it better than others; the skull-splitting headache usually ended in about a minute, but for some it lasted longer. And for some, the aftermath left them feeling the same kind of relief, and even a grim kind of pride. Ryuko Matoi had stared into their soul and found nothing objectionable. Whatever strange and dark thoughts she might have glimpsed (and she was right that the first waiter was not the only one whose love for her had a more... lustful side to it) she judged them not. And they were innocent. For others though the whole thing was just too scary, too alien, and they broke into tears or sat there exhausted and despondent. The guards had to call family members to take away a few of them. Houka made sure to check on all of those individuals through the security system – they all seemed to merely collapse into sleep the moment they got the chance.

Ryuko was a bit more than halfway through with the bunch. She had just finished mind stitching one of the cooks whose job was overseeing the extensive pantry and refrigerators, and instead of doing her best to care for the woman she suddenly shot to her feet. The fiery rage was back and she shouted, "It was a *different fucking delivery man!*"

Everyone kind of froze – by this point the kamui were having a telepathic side conversation. That was it? After all this. But Misaki said, ~ *[Well, how about that, you're right. It wasn't the usual father-son crew yesterday, and the miso stock did come from that truck. Poor audio from the security feed when he was talking to Mrs. Kimura here though, 'cuz the truck's still running.]* ~

Ryuko scoffed, “Oh yeah, real convenient for him. Well, she was right there,” She pointed to the cook, “And from her recollection the guy was *real* curious about when this stuff was gonna get used. Who was gonna eat it.”

“So it was already poisoned before it even arrived?” Satsuki asked.

“Looks like it,” Ryuko said, and then to Houka and Shiro and their Kamui. “You know what to do. Find that guy.”

They nodded, and Misaki said, ~ *[Already way ahead of you.]* ~

~~~~~

That guy - an assassin - as it happened, was in the middle of his morning workout. His bare concrete room with its corrugated metal roof and flimsy wood door was far from the conditions he was used to back at HQ but that didn't matter to him. He completed each exercise mechanically, in a state of meditative blankness befitting a true killing machine.

There was a knock at the door. The assassin carefully cracked it open, letting in bright sun and a blast of cold air and snow. And let him see about half of a middle-aged man with a wrinkled, sun-beaten face and a worn-down old snow jacket. He was the liaison The Order had given him while he laid low here in this remote Andean village.

“What?”

“Mr. Sato, there's someone asking after you in the village. Out-of-town men. Looked like cops from Lima,” The man answered in Spanish.

Mr. Sato frowned. No way they were actually Peruvian police. It looked like The Order really had sent someone to clean up. They said that nobody knew he was here, that each safehouse was set up years in advance and randomly chosen for each job. He certainly hadn't had any contact with The Order since he left his fake life in Japan behind. But perhaps this job had just been too big to leave loose ends. Oh well, it wasn't like he hadn't prepared for this. “Show me.”

He grabbed his sniper rifle and sidearm and followed his liaison out. The mountain gorge below was steep and desolate – his shack stood high above a small village along a dirt road. Only a single winding path connected them, covered in packed snow. And there were three small shapes on it – men on horseback.

“You've done well. Go now, I will dispose of them,” Mr. Sato said. He strode up to the edge of the small rocky platform on which his shack was set, limberly laying prone and positioning his rifle right over the edge. He could draw a bead on the men below without them seeing anything but a dull black dot.

*None the wiser. Maybe it is time I start my freelance career, I'm way overqualified for just slipping poison into a lady's dinner,* He thought as he lined up his shot on the first one.

Something stinging struck the back of his neck. Instantly he slapped his hand to it, catching a fluffy plume of fletching. A tranquilizer dart.

“Fucking bastard!” Mr. Sato shouted in English, rolling around to face his liaison. They'd gotten to him? How? He reached for his sidearm, intent on at least gunning the man down

before the tranquilizer took effect. But to his dismay he couldn't make his hand clamp around the pistol's grip. It was fast acting indeed.

The last thing he saw as his eyelids dropped was a look of genuine glee on his liaison's face. And he thought he heard, dimly, something along the lines of, "Shouldn't've messed with Our Lady."

~~~~~

"I gotta say, I did not expect that you would turn the locals before we even got here," Those were the first words Mr. Sato heard as he returned to consciousness. A man, dressed as a police officer though clearly not one. That was all he could make out through bleary vision. That fucking blue light was so bright!

~ *[People underestimate how connected the modern world is. Even this town has network access in the post office. And even out here, it's a rare person indeed who won't listen when they hear that Ryuko Matoi needs their help with something.]*~ Another voice, a woman's. Something about it sounded off. Where was it coming from?

As Mr. Sato's vision cleared, he saw the room clearly. It looked like a back room in some shop down in the village, cleared out so there was nothing between its cracked plaster walls but the chair he was sitting on and a table. And on that table was the source of the light - a black box like a moderately sized safe, with seams running all around it. Facing him, the source of the blue light. A projector? No, it was more like a camera. An eye.

"As it should be," The man said. He and his comrades stood around the box, but they didn't seem to be operating it. The woman must have been in control of it from a remote location. "Well, I'm sorry but I don't think he'll be much good for talking for a while. That tranquilizer'll keep him pretty much paralyzed for another few hours."

~ *[No matter. The scanning device you see before you will tell me everything I need to know. In fact, when you're ready you may depart. Thank you for your assistance, sirs.]*~ The woman said. That voice, it was coming from within the box itself.

"Really? It must be some fancy tech."

~ *[State of the art. It was just shipped over from Japan for this mission.]*~

Japan?

Oh no.

"Well good luck to you Miss... Misaki?"

~ *[That's right.]* ~

"So, like the Kamui?"

~ *[... That's above your pay grade,]* ~ The woman said tersely.

"Oh. Alright."

But then she added, in a cheery, conspiratorial tone, ~ *[But, off the record, yeah. Pretty much exactly like the kamui.]* ~

“Whoa,” The lead agent grinned at his comrades. “And here I thought Kamui were tied to their human wearers.”

~ *[There’s a lot you don’t know about Kamui,]*~ Misaki said proudly.

“Clearly. Hey, what’d this guy do, anyway? He must be on the run for something.”

~ *[Well now that is classified. I told you the other thing because he’s not leaving this room alive. But that’s as far as I’ll go, sorry,]* ~

The agent nodded, said, “Fair enough. Well then, I suppose I’ll leave you to it, Kamui Misaki,” and then left.

Mr. Sato tried to move. Bound to his chair and pressed up against a smooth wall that afforded no purchase, he didn’t have a lot of room to maneuver. He was only constrained by handcuffs and was well trained to slip out of them. But the agent hadn’t lied, even trying to twitch his fingers made them sore and numb. Not good. He knew now why that light felt so much like an eye, it was one. It was the eye of a *kamui*, one of the aliens these Japs worshipped. A man who hadn’t had his emotions beaten out of him might have despaired, began to consider just how his life had gotten him here, but instead all he thought was that he needed to escape. It was just a box, if only he could stand, he could destroy it.

But he couldn’t even move.

~ *[Well now, just you and me,]* ~ The kamui sounded oddly casual, even chipper, ~ *[Let’s start by X-raying you for microchip implants. Usually, they put one of those lead aprons on someone when they do this, but I don’t really have one here. Sorry about that. But if it’s any solace, we don’t really have the film X-rays usually use either. So I’m going to have to paint it right on the wall. And the type of beam that’s capable of that, a lead apron wouldn’t do shit against.]* ~

A thin whine emanated from the box. It steadily grew louder. And the light grew brighter, glowing white instead of blue now. It was blinding. And *hot*. Oh god, it was *so hot*! It was burning, burning right through him! And if it hit his heart – no, it was *going* to hit his heart – it was going to spread all over his body and boil him, from the inside out. Now he began to think, to remember that there was a time in his life when he wanted something other than to kill people for the emperor of America.

He screamed, and heard Misaki said, ~ *[Just relax. It’s not going to kill you. Right away.]*

~

~~~~~

“So, it looks like our hunch was right. The perpetrator was a member of something called “The Thousand Eagle Order” or just the Thousand Eagles. An order of assassins that live in monastic seclusion, strictly speaking not part of the imperial government but owing their allegiance directly to the royal family. Microchip implants confirmed it, just by the structure alone even before Misaki scanned the data,” Houka said.

“So, like part of the CIA?” Mataro asked.



“More like the CIA to the CIA. The average American doesn’t even know these guys exist,” Shiro explained. They were all sitting around Satsuki’s desk, now finishing their long-interrupted dinner. Even on a day like today, you couldn’t keep a kamui wearer away from food, they just needed it too badly.

Ryuko, on the other hand, hadn’t touched hers. Too bad too, because the reserve kitchen staff had been called in from off shift and had thrown together something quite nice for her – Lemon Piccata, an Italian chicken recipe she liked. But when Satsuki reminded her that they had tested every ingredient in the kitchens and only the miso stock had been poisoned, she just shrugged. “How’m I supposed to feel like eating?” She muttered, “Every bite I’m sure I’m gonna taste it again.”

The conversation continued around her. “Well, it’s good to know how they did it, even if we knew all along who the culprits were,” Uzu said, “I guess we can consider any possibility of peaceful diplomacy with America a thing of the past. I take it the dude’s dead?”

“Quite. Our spies in Peru and the new scanner box were both quite effective,” Houka said proudly.

“You got to him fast,” Aikuro commented.

“Wouldn’t be a point to everything we do if we didn’t,” Houka said. “So, the only question now is how we’re going to hit back.”

He looked to Ryuko for that. As Satsuki said, it was her call. She still looked a bit dejected though, and Uzu said, “They did hit first. One attempted assassination of an heir, I don’t think they could fault us if ours is more successful.”

Ryuko sighed, a very long, drawn out sigh with a hand propping up her head. “...No. I’m gonna be better than that. I showed that fuck how easy it is to get a rise out of me, so if I try and kill him now that’ll just be what he wants.”

Mataro had to protest, seeing Ryuko so down like this was just unacceptable, “No way! We’ve got to-,”

“ ‘Kill an unborn child? We’d never! That’s against our religion!’ That’s what he’ll say to his people. Or if we do manage to kill Joe Galton, someone else exactly the same’ll be saying it in his place. The emperor is like, dying or something. If we take him out, we’ll only be doing Joe a favor, because I bet you that he’s already taken himself out of the firing line.”

“Well...” Houka shrugged. Shiro nudged him

“C’mon, you did good with the assassin,” Shiro said.

“Oh, fine,” Houka shook his head, “I’m afraid you may be right. We don’t have any idea where he went. Like REVOCS, he’s probably got a hideout somewhere that doesn’t use wireless signal at all. All the electronics totally off the grid, not even one test message for us to intercept. It’s a huge blind spot, but without even transmissions to capture there’s nothing we can do. He’s in his bunker until he gets bored.”

Ryuko held up a hand, “You see? He planned this shit. He planned for me to explode the White House and his uncle and then everyone in America would turn against me. So even if we

could, it wouldn't be any good to try and kill the guy responsible for this." She spat the words out, and nobody else quite knew what else to say.

Finally, Nonon said, "Well, not yet, anyway. But he'll have to show his head eventually, one way or another he wants a war. We will get this bastard eventually."

"Yeah... I know..." But that wasn't enough. They all knew it wasn't enough for her, but it wasn't enough for Satsuki either. She'd kept stoic the entire time, and sure she appreciated that Ryuko was thinking of the practicalities, but the same rage that burned in Ryuko was in her too. Worse even. They shared a glance, and Ryuko said, "But those Thousand Eagles, they're secret. We should get rid of them."

"Understood. I'll see to it myself," Satsuki nodded. *Well, that's what she wants to do,* Ryuko thought. It was almost a good thought, that Satsuki would do this for her, for their child. Like this was back to the old days, watching each other's backs, that felt right didn't it? *Only it's not right. She'll look back on this with regret, say that she let old habits take over. Well maybe that's true, but she was only that way because she had to be to fight evil, and right now we're up against pure evil again!* Again. How long would other people insist on being evil, didn't they realize the real evil was still out there? *Still though, she won't be happy about it. I wonder if she's already thinking it, mentally preparing to go kill.*

Ryuko stood up and said, "Alright. You gonna bring a team?"

"I suppose so. Nonon? You feel some responsibility for a broken reassurance, yes?"

Nonon shrugged, "Yeah, I suppose so."

"Very well. I'm going to head down to the armory now, if you care to join--"

"Wait!" Mataro suddenly said. "Put me on for this."

"Wha-!" Mako exclaimed, looking at something other than her food or Ryuko for the first time in the conversation. But nobody else said anything.

~ *[Infiltration is our specialty,]* ~ Wakaiketsu said, ~ *[This is the job for us.]* ~

"... It's gonna be a bloodbath kid, are you sure?" Nonon asked.

"What else am I supposed to do to help? I can't get the information or do the diplomatics, but get into a base?" He looked at Ryuko with a challenging glare. "I hate to see you like this too, you know. But I'm not Mako either."

Ryuko had to take a good, long think about that one. "Take Mataro," She finally said. Satsuki nodded and gave her hand a squeeze. "I'm going upstairs now. Mako?"

Mako got up too, taking her dinner and Ryuko's with them. "Man, I miss Senketsu right about now," Ryuko muttered to her as she walked away.

~~~~~

"So, the base is located within a mountain, with few entrances and exits. A direct assault would give them the chance to escape, so a ventilation shaft. I assume you've already got your hands on the schematics," Satsuki said to Houka. They had moved to the armory, the little

concrete shed filled with guns and other weaponry in the woods behind the mansion. Satsuki was standing over the table, meticulously cleaning a rifle, one of two she would be bringing. The other was strapped to her back by a compact latching system, along with two pistols on the back of her hips, two on the sides, another pair on the front of her hips, and even an extra pair clipped to her thighs. Almost twenty spare mags were strapped to her chest, along with a brace of smoke and flash grenades. And then a pair of swords and a few extra knives – hardened life-fiber, for the durability. “Here, take a few of these,” She passed some flash grenades over to Mataro, who was sitting on the table. “They’ll interact well with your blinding ability.”

“Mmm,” Mataro took them, clipped them to Wakaiketsu’s belt.

~[Only you’ll be blinded too, and you don’t have shingantu.]~ Wakaiketsu pointed out.

“That’s true. Houka?”

Houka was leaning in the door, and he went to one of the lower shelves and selected a pair of night-vision goggles which he passed to Satsuki. “They have flash compensators. You’ll be fine in the dark or the light. Which reminds me, they may have some means to shut off the ventilation, or pump toxic gas. Wakaiketsu, you should be able to synthesize a simple form with a ventilator for Mataro, every kamui that’s had to make one found it quite easy when under duress. But I’ll make sure there’s a ventilator and air tank for you on the dropship, Satsuki.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Now, what you were saying, there are a few air ducts that you should be able to fit down easily. They have alarms, but you don’t need to worry about those.”

~ [Their security AI was formidable, nearly sentient. But not quite. Took me just a few minutes to make it **mine**. And they’re none the wiser, of course,] ~ Misaki said smugly.

“Very good. I suspect they’ll have some manual overrides, but nothing we can’t overcome. Do they have anti-life-fiber technology?”

“Almost certainly,” Houka nodded, “Hardened life-fibers and starching rounds, at least. All from REVOCS, we know they have contact. So it’s nothing you haven’t dealt with before. They may have life-fiber sensors too, so I would suggest sending Mataro in first.”

“Agreed. Your work today was excellent, as always,” Satsuki said.

“We can’t take all the credit. Any intelligence work done by Misaki is also a team effort with Izanami.”

~ [I’m surprised he didn’t want to come along,] ~ Wakaiketsu said. ~ [To protect his ‘experiment’.] ~

“I think they didn’t like how that would look,” Houka chuckled.

There was a faint rushing of wind outside, and Mako landed in the doorway. “Satsuki, Ryuko’s still really upset,” She said.

Satsuki didn’t look up, “That makes sense.”

That answer, to Mako, was like something an alien would say. She scrunched up her face into a scowl and said, “You shouldn’t be doing this. You should be with her.”

That made Satsuki stop, set the rifle down. She looked down at the table and said, “And what would I say? I can’t even promise her something like this won’t happen again.”

“Then don’t say anything,” Mako said. “She’s your *wife*. She needs you. Not after you finish this mission, now.”

Satsuki’s eyes looked glassy, transfixed on the table’s surface. Her tells were subtle as ever, but the tension clenching her shoulders and the way her lips were drawn so thin over gritted teeth was enough to tell that she had just about reached her breaking point.

“She had to *mind stitch* people today. You know she didn’t want to do that. How do you think that made her feel?”

“I know that. But this needs to be done. Mako they tried to kill my daughter. And what Ryuko would have gone through... They don’t get to get away with this,” Satsuki said forcefully.

“And now you could die tonight fighting them!” Mako shouted.

“I won’t.”

“Yeah, I know that. But you could,” Mako pressed on with crossed arms, “You’re really going to make Ryuko worry about that all night? Because you know she will.”

“I don’t -,” Satsuki didn’t know what to say. “Is she really scared for me?”

“Of course she is,” Mako said, more sweetly, and she came over and put a hand over Satsuki’s. “She’d still let you go, but she is. It’s okay to be scared.”

“I know, but -,” But looking into Mako’s soft, ever-sympathetic eyes broke down the final barrier around everything that had been building in Satsuki all day. “She’d never forgive me if I did die, huh?” She hugged Mako tightly, squeezing a few tears out of her own eyes in the process.

“C’mon, let’s go inside,” Mako said, and when they parted Satsuki began to remove all the weaponry from herself.

*[So, it looks like we’re going by ourselves, aren’t we?]* Wakaiketsu asked. *[We’re going to kill an entire order of assassins by ourselves.]* With that realization, the feeling of intensity that came before a mission hit Mataro. Usually that happened while he was creeping through the underbrush, but now it struck right there in the armory shed. In just a few hours, he would be in combat. It made all his sense stand out, bold and immediate. And as she left Satsuki fixed him a look, still steely despite the water in her eyes, but Mataro couldn’t help but see a deep sadness in there too. Not the crying kind but directed at him.

When she was gone, he hopped off the table and said to Houka, “Well I’m gonna head to the dropship. If you’re not doing anything, I’d appreciate some tac support.”

“Sure. I took a nap this afternoon so I’m up for a late night.”

But Mako was back in the doorway. “Mataro...”

Mataro pulled up, "You're not gonna stop us so easily, sis."

"You're sure you want to do this?"

"Someone has to. Why not us?"

~ *[This is what I was created for,]* ~ Wakaiketsu said, more to Tonbo than Mako, ~ *[It's different for you. But for us...]* ~

"We're going to do what we can for Ryuko," Mataro said resolutely, pushing past her. "And besides, this isn't the time to get all moral. These people, you know they aren't like REVOCS. REVOCS except for the top level they've all been duped, you can't blame them for it, the life-fibers have them snared. They think the life-fibers were going to send everyone to heaven, basically, so at least they think they're doing the best thing for humanity. That's why we catch them when we can, but these guys aren't like that. They don't have a *reason*, they just think it's right that their emperor gets to rule over everyone in the world. They're the real monsters. It'd be right even if they hadn't tried to kill Ryuko's baby."

Mako called out into the evening dark, "Maybe but... you're still my little brother! What would Mom think, if she knew?"

Mataro didn't want to think about that. "Mako. You know I've killed people before, right?"

He kept walking. Mako hung her head, "...Yeah."

Houka put a hand on her shoulder and said, "We'll be in his ear the whole way. He'll come back safe, at least."

~~~~~

In a simple office deep beneath the Rocky Mountains, a man was stirred from sleep by a blaring alarm. He shot up, immediately at the ready – even the commander of the Thousand Eagles slept ready to fight at a moment's notice.

He flung the door open into the main hall. In this vaulted chamber with its cool walls of stone and steel girders there was a bustle of activity, men geared for combat taking up posts at every door, assembling automated turrets. Others streamed out one of the side corridors in huge numbers. Meanwhile, the 'handlers' were assembled at the computer terminals in the middle of the hall, huge screens above them displaying readouts of the base layout. A huge red light glowed in one of the first level corridors.

The commander's aide hurried up to them. "They're here!" He reported.

"The Kamui," He nodded, "That was fast. How'd they slip through the perimeter defenses?"

"Unclear. We have a hundred men, about to make contact."

"Show me," The largest two screens flashed over to a video feed from that hall. One in color, the other infrared heat signatures. About twenty or so bodies lay sprawled around it, and in the center... "Only one, huh? Which is this now?"

“Mankanshoku, seems like.” The aide said. The commander leaned close over a railing, inspecting the grainy little figure with his cloak and his twin swords.

“And the men are armed with the new starching rounds?”

“Yes. There are murder holes all along that corridor, they can hit him from behind seven feet of titanium.”

“Good,” The commander said with relish, “Standing out in the open like that, it doesn’t matter how fast he is. Seal the doors and kill the lights!”

At his command, the color camera screen dropped to black. In the infrared, tiny specks of heat could be seen through the walls as soldiers positioned their barrels. On both ends of the hallway more filed in, unfolding into firing lines with perfect discipline. They had him now.

The first shot was fired, and in the same moment the camera screen suddenly glowed white, so bright that some of the handlers gasped. That couldn’t be right, the commander knew he’d heard the sound of a standard flash grenade over the audio feed. Standard models weren’t that bright.

And on the infrared monitor he saw something quite different. His men recoiled, blinded. But the little man-shaped figure of the kamui had a very different reaction. It was like it was everywhere at once. It carved through one firing squad, then the other, and then with a rumbling that could be felt in the main hall it sliced clean through the walls, wrenching them open with its hands once it had a purchase. And then the men pressed in the alcoves behind were quite helpless.

By the time the light had faded on the color camera feed, all there was to see was blood, rubble, and dust. The kamui was gone.

“Oh, he’s good. He’s very good,” The commander chuckled madly to himself, licking his lips. Silence filled the hall. “Well, what are you waiting for?” He yelled, “Arm yourselves! The enemy has come for us today, and by God we will not let the emperor down like they just did!”

But they would.

~~~~~

Four hours across the Pacific, just over an hour of combat (had it really been an hour? It felt like so much longer), four hours back across. And here Mataro was, almost a full twelve hours after he’d arrived at dinnertime the day before, slinking through the same lounge doors he’d used before.

He’d slept a bit on the flight back, but still felt far too wired for a good rest. Images, recollections of the fight – blitzing through the corridors, cutting them down where they stood, where they fought, where they ran screaming – kept coming up when he closed his eyes. Like he couldn’t quite convince his exhausted brain the fight was over yet. Like a part of his mind was still back in the main hall, where the bodies piled up, waiting for another straggler to rise up with a hardened life-fiber sword clutched desperately. Honestly, he had to respect it, at least enough to dial down his strength to fight the last few on their own level. And yeah, they were good. But he wasn’t going to let them kill him.

“Hey,” He was snapped out of his exhaustion by Satsuki’s voice. She was sitting in one of the big armchairs, reading, with a mostly empty glass of wine beside her. She smiled warmly, and Mataro felt his tension give way a bit.

“Hey. Ryuko alright?”

“She’s asleep. And she needs it too, I didn’t want to disturb her.” Mataro came around to sit across for Satsuki, and she took another sip of her wine. She smirked and said, “I know, it should be tea. You must be shocked.”

“No, it’s chill,” Mataro said, “I was gonna say, after a day like today you deserve it.”

“Thank you. I guess you could say I’m doing it in Ryuko’s stead.”

“That must burn her.”

“That’s why I’m down here,” Satsuki whispered. “So, how’d it go?”

Ah, debrief time. “It went. They’re all dead. Hunting down the last couple was a pain, but Misaki sealed the escapes.”

Satsuki nodded, “A pain indeed.”

“Yeah, well, that’s how it goes.”

Satsuki looked thoughtful. “You like wine, Mataro?”

He shrugged, “It’s alright. Nothing wrong with it.”

“You look like you could use something a little better than alright.”

Mataro had been down in the mansion’s wine cellar before, but never very far back into its recesses. It went back rows and rows, but most of what it held was fairly everyday. Fine quality wines and liquors but bought in bulk, so that guests could have whatever they wanted and never worry about it running out. But Ryuko had told him that in the back was where they hid the real treasures.

Satsuki led him right there, obviously she knew what she was looking for already. Up on the top shelf, she slid a bottle out of its little wooden compartment. Its was fairly nondescript, a typical round bottle with one of those long teardrop-shaped necks, and the liquid inside was so dark brown it was almost red. It was unlabelled except for an etching that simply said *1928*.

“Yooo…” Mataro murmured appreciatively as she passed it over.

“I’m told that’s the second most valuable bottle of scotch left in the world. That kind of vintage, all the rest have been either lost or… well, drank. Just something Ragyo obtained at some point, not because she’d ever use it but just because that’s how she was,” Satsuki explained

“So what is this, my payment?”

“Oh, you thought I didn’t want to try any? I’m taking tomorrow off anyway, aren’t you?”

“You mean today. It’s four A.M.,” Mataro chuckled.

“Well it’s not my usual ‘cup of tea’, but I guess I am curious what the fuss is about. Come now, it must be enjoyed properly.”

As they turned to go, Mataro asked, “And what about the most expensive? I mean, not that second-best is too good for me, but who’s got that.”

That actually brought a full smile to Satsuki’s face. She pointed to the bottle right next to the freshly emptied compartment. 1926. “Oh!” Mataro gasped with a laugh of shock.

“And *that* one, I obtained. And it will only be opened by Ryuko, on the night *after* Nozomi is born and hybridized safely.”

Back up in the lounge, Mataro wasted no time pouring out two glasses. They raised them, and Satsuki said, “Am I a bad influence? I’m a bad influence.”

“I dunno, I did just kill a thousand people for you.”

“A thousand *eagles*,” Satsuki said, which was so unexpected it made Mataro bark out a short little laugh. “Oh, don’t worry, you’re still well behind the others. And my kill-count at your age would still make you blush.”

“Well then you’re all bad influences,” Mataro said.

“Can’t argue with that,” Satsuki said, and with that they took a sip. It took Satsuki a moment to pronounce her verdict, but she said, “Oh my, I guess I do see what all the fuss is about.”

“Yeah, holy shit,” Mataro agreed, “It’s so smooth its like water. Like water out of one of those fancy purifiers.”

“You know I did somewhat expect to be pouring the rest of my glass into yours. But I think I’ll stick with this, if you don’t mind.”

“At this proof? Go for it, a runt like me doesn’t need the whole damn bottle.”

They sat there as the night became early morning, slowly sipping and talking about anything other than the events that had consumed them for the past twelve hours. About halfway through their second glasses though, Satsuki took a lull in the conversation and said, “I will make it worth it Mataro.”

“Huh?”

“What you did for me today. I know it must seem like this whole thing is just some pointless political feud, and maybe it is, but I will make it more than that. It all began because of Ryuko trying to make a change for the better,” Satsuki said, with the weight of someone reminiscing on it themselves.

“Yeah, I know that. I heard about the whole Kiryuin Fortune thing,” Mataro said.

“And defanging the American Empire will go a long way towards building that kind of world. You’ll see. We have to struggle through it now, but you’ll see. And it’s not a faraway thing either. Within our lifetime, it will all be worth it.”



“I know,” Mataro said. *It’s already worth it though, isn’t it? Here I am, drinking century old scotch and having a heart-to-heart with Satsuki!* It was pretty much exactly what he expected it would be like.

“Is it... sitting alright with you? I saw some of the footage Houka took from the security cameras. When you made it to the great hall...”

“You know, it’s funny. When you’re a kid, you think about how cool it would be to go all action-hero like that. I’m sure I did even one time pick a buncha evil spies as the target. And you’re imagining it, and you think ‘what could be better than that?’ But you don’t really believe it would ever be you, actually doing those things.”

“Hmm,” Satsuki looked thoughtful. “I understand.”

“I guess what I’m trying to say is... I dunno. We go out there, and we’re ‘The Young Prince’ for a while. But only after I got back, saw you again, are we back to Wakaiketsu and Mataro again. Maybe that’s just how it feels to fight as one but... I think I like the kind of separation between the two we’ve got.”

# Ryuko Matoi Must be Destroyed

## Chapter Summary

Kind of a build-up chapter.  
Next up: The part two finale!

Though it will be an "as I get around to it" thing, and this will be a very lengthy series of chapters coming up. I'm sorry, I wish I had more time but I am working as hard as I can. As always please let me know what you think, it's super important as we go into these final chapters that I make them as good as possible.

September 2068

~~~~~

The REVOCS headquarters extended deep underground. Layers upon layers of living quarters, vehicle bays, halls for training and prayer. And down below that, the darker things. But all of these chambers were cut in the same, imposing style. Polished stone, vaulted ceilings, a place that spoke of the empty, impersonal grandeur of the life-fibers. To an outsider, it was maybe not so overtly evil looking as they might have expected. But it was just as cold and inhospitable to humanity as the arctic chill outside.

However, there was a part of the headquarters that was nothing like that. On the surface; not stark and cold but opulently cozy. Mahogany and velvet, heated saunas cut from marble and VR gaming lounges with slick modern furniture, libraries and fine dining halls decorated with baroque imagery – both the cult's own icons and fine art of ages past. Ragyo among the gods of ancient Rome, Nui surrounded by delicate Victorian floral engravings, artful enough to almost make it feel as though they belonged there.

This area was the Executive Suites. Arranged in a ring around the headquarters' massive central amphitheater, so close to the surface that they had windows peering out over rolling arctic ocean on one side and the central amphitheater on the other, they even had their own tram system to make life just that extra bit more comfortable. This was where the funders of REVOCS lived. True believers who were too soft and spoiled for real responsibility or extraneous aristocrats who had signed on after Satsuki took control on the promise that once the new regime was overthrown everything would go back to how it had been. Here they could be sheltered from the cold truths below, including that it was more and more obvious that overthrow wasn't coming.

Except in one of those lounges there were two people who knew that truth very well.

A delicate, cone shaped glass sped across the room and crashed into a marble column, shattering across the thick carpeting. It had flown from the pale, trembling hand of Prince Joseph Galton, who paced around the room furiously. "I'm going to nuke her. That's it! One day. One fucking *day* it took them, and it's all gone! Decades of recruitment, brainwashing, training! You should have seen the piles of bodies that... things, that *demon* left!" He laughed, a thin, seething laugh,

“She must’ve forgotten. That bitch must have forgotten that with just the push of a button I can annihilate them all!” His voice came out shrill and nasal – there was still a large splint over his broken nose.

Takamori Kiryuin was sitting, much more calmly, on a leather sofa. He watched Joseph rage with an indifferent, blank expression. He tipped his cocktail over his metal jaw and said, ~ *“That’s not going to bring her to the table. Matoi may not be human, but she was raised as one – a hood, to be precise. Nukes, bombs, drone strikes, people close to her or random citizens, all she knows is to hit back as hard and fast as possible. You’ll only get more retribution that way.”* ~

Joseph scoffed, “Oh no, no we are past that. Negotiations are through! Ryuko Matoi must be destroyed!”

~ *“Well that won’t do it either.”* ~

“Oh, *come on!*” Joseph said, more directed at Takamori than at that fact. What the fuck was wrong with this asshole, wasn’t his whole purpose in life to destroy her?

~ *“It’s true. Her body is almost like a puppet, a skin for the monster inside. Break the puppet as many times as you want, she can always make a new one. No, a nuke won’t do. And even then, the heat and radiation resistance of the other kamui is probably enough for them to survive too,”* ~ Takamori finished his drink, ~ *“It doesn’t serve anyone if you burn their country only for them to burn yours back.”* ~

Joseph’s eyebrows rose. “So that’s it, huh? Time for us all to bow down before the new goddess?” He rushed up, suddenly leaning above Takamori, and spat, “After all the money I gave you, all the tanks and the guns and the stealth bombers, this is how you repay me! What the fuck was the point of you! You promised the ash and the volcanoes would starve them out but no, they’re doing better than eve, you said your kamui would kill them and look! One of them’s *dead*, and the others run away every time they fight! And now you say we can’t kill them, not even with a nuke. I thought they cut off your jaw, not your balls!” Takamori was unphased, so he tried a different tack, “Come on man, she’s got to have some kind of weakness. *Something* that can kill her.”

Takamori set his drink down, and with a languid motion of outstretched fingers he slowly pushed Joseph back. Though they were equal in height, Takamori was a Kiryuin, with a warrior’s stature. As he sat up and straightened his back the difference only became more obvious. Not to mention that little electric charge that passed through his suit – there were certainly plentiful life-fibers coursing through it. Joseph did back up; the mad, raging little gleam in his eyes faltered in the face of the cold death in Takamori’s. ~ *Need I remind you,* ~ His mechanical voice grated, ~ *“That Matoi would have your **heart** if we did not provide this refuge.”* ~

“Yes, yes, and of course I’m grateful for that,” Joseph muttered.

~ *“As it happens though, you are not wrong. Matoi does have two key weaknesses. The first is a serum, developed by her father to suppress and hide her powers when she was a child. It acts fast, and once it has set in she is as weak and feeble as any mortal woman for four months, at which point it slowly wears off,”* ~ Takamori said, and this made Joseph’s eyes light up.

“Oh! Oho, now *that’s* something. All I would need is a lifetime supply of *that* and then...” He immediately sprung out, back to pacing, but with a lively enthusiasm. No, he wouldn’t finish that sentence even to Takamori – though they had known each other back in Ragyo’s day and had done plenty of reprehensible things to their sex slaves in each other’s company. That all still paled in

comparison to what Joseph could dream up, when he had that smug bitch begging for mercy back home in the palace. The things he could do over the long years with her as his ever-youthful pet. How he'd break her.

~ *"If **we** were to capture her this way,"* ~ Takamori said, ~ *"You understand that it is REVOC's aim to use her as a vessel for the revival of the Goddess Ragyo."* ~

"Sure, I have nothing but respect for your aunt, may she rest in peace."

~ *"Which means that her body would be treated with utmost respect while in transit,"* ~ Takamori said, and Joseph shrugged and acquiesced, ~ *"However, even if your servants were the ones to capture her using this substance, there are still many difficulties involved. Firstly, there is the act of administering the serum at all – she is easily capable of outrunning bullets so a dart would be child's play, and as you have learned sneaking into her palace while she sleeps is practically impossible. We tried to trap her into it once, and she just... didn't fall for it. On top of that, we have reason to believe that she carries a dose of the antidote with her at all times, anyway. But **even if** you managed that, she still has the other kamui. They would find her. They would kill anyone in their way. And if you harmed a single hair on her head, they would find ways to torment you which humanity has not even named."* ~

"Great. So we're still fucked."

~ *"Don't pout. Whatever she is, Matoi is not so easily subdued. Even if she were mortal, she is still an equal in combat to **Satsuki**"* ~ He managed to spit her traitorous name out even with an artificial voice. ~ *"Even without a trace of her powers she would still kill you."* ~ Takamori stood up, looked philosophically out the window at the dark, roiling waves and weak arctic sunrise. ~ *"But there's still the second weakness I mentioned."* ~

"Uh huh?" Joseph was practically skipping back and forth in nervous anticipation.

Takamori didn't answer right away though. No, he waited for a bartender to silently, deferentially creep in from a back room, prepare him a new drink, pass it over, and disappear again. ~ *"We can talk candidly, you and I. Right? For instance, I don't mind that little outburst a moment ago. We're not like other men. You, through direct control or your puppet states, control the entire American hemisphere, don't you?"* ~

Joseph nodded, "I do indeed," Though they both knew that his control over the large urban centers was highly disputed and the more distance rural reaches like the depths of Canada, Alaska, and the Amazon were still beyond his reach.

~ *"And I am the sole legitimate heir to the Kiryuins. By rights, Eurasia is mine. We're a different class from the rest of the world. And in private, I can share certain criticisms of my organization which lesser ears wouldn't understand. Right?"* ~

"Oh, absolutely," Joseph smiled. Takamori, sharing his secrets, his plans? Joseph was despite himself honored to be hearing this.

~ *"Well. You know what the life-fibers promised us, you know what I believed – believe. We could have become one with them, it was the natural order of things. I know, I know we never got you over to our cause, but we both can agree on one thing. There was nothing in any of our prophecies about Ryuko Matoi. The lesser members of our organization, yes even the Grand Couturière, who is supposedly our leader, they still think that she fits into the plan somehow. That she and her*

*kamui are, like you said, demons. You know how it is, in the stories you tell your followers there are demons, but God always triumphs over them in the end,” ~ Takamori shook his head. ~ “Matoi isn’t a demon. She’s not part of the story. She’s something they never accounted for. I’ve figured that out. Why? Well, as you pointed out before, our Kamui have time and time again failed to stop her and her spawn. Yes, they’re stronger, yes they’re faster, but it’s not just that they are outnumbered. They’re outclassed. Jakuzure killed one all on her own, and that’s only because she is **better** than them.”*

“Pssh! She’s got her superhuman powers, sure, but she’s a fuckin’ pop star! I remember her from way back, she’s just one of Satsuki’s cronies!” Joseph protested. The bartender brought him another drink, and he greedily accepted it.

Takamori’s synthetic voice made the pantomime of a laugh. A prerecorded sound played on cue, not a genuine product of his vocal cords. ~ *“I know it might seem hard to believe, from half a world away. But what the stories say about Honnouji? They really did all that. She’s been a killer, the likes of which hasn’t been seen since ancient Sparta, since before she even got her Kamui. They all are. She’s not even the most dangerous, Sanageyama is... you can’t kill him. I’ve tried.” ~*

“I... see.”

~ *“Whereas our Kamui, I’ve observed them fight. They’re deadly, but they have a formula. A set system of moves they can’t deviate from. Because you see, they don’t have the mind to learn and adapt like a human. They’re part of the greater whole, but just part. Like white blood cells. But there are diseases too powerful for a few white blood cells.” ~*

“They do say the life-fibers are a collective being. A hivemind, so to speak,” Joseph nodded.

~ *“The trivial conception of a ‘hivemind’ we humans have placed in our books and movies is utterly inadequate to understand the life-fibers. Our consciousness is but the illusory product of a certain combination of neurons, theirs is written into the fabric of the universe,” ~ Takamori said; it had a reverential edge but really, he said it as a statement of fact. ~ “No, the life-fibers have barely noticed what is happening on this planet. It would be good for them, and for us, if the problem was dealt with before they needed to devote more energy. And it can be. Ryuko Matoi can be killed.” ~*

He turned back towards Joseph, lifted his hand. Two fingers pointed, clicked together in a snipping motion. ~ *“Hardened life-fibers. That’s what we call it, but in fact it is a shell built from a metallic element previously unknown to human science. The life-fibers can be coerced into secreting it around themselves given the proper conditions. It has the peculiar property of ignoring the repulsive energy fields life-fiber clothing generates to protect its host – you know this, but that is not all. When two blades of hardened life-fiber are drawn across each other, it creates a wound that Ryuko’s regeneration can never heal. The cross-cut.” ~*

“Ahhh,” Joseph said, finally understanding, “Hence Ryuko’s scissor blades.”

~ *“And all her kamui are armed to deal that finishing blow in at least one way. They live in constant expectation that one day Ragyo or another with her powers will return. And they’re right to be afraid, because their mistress could be killed in much the same way if only there was a being capable of besting her.” ~*

“I see. So our only hope is to kill her outright, the old fashioned way. But you’re kamui aren’t up to it. And well, neither are we,” Joseph chuckled. “So, what do you want to show me?”

Takamori smiled as best his metal jaw would allow, ~ “*You tread on my next line, prince Galton.*”

~

~~~~~

The elevator lowered into an observation chamber overlooking a wide hall. Takamori and Joseph took seats on fine upholstered couches. Maidservants stepped out from the shadows and silently refilled their drinks and provided plates of various bite-sized delicacies as they looked out. Between stark stone columns, the floor was crowded with half-naked women fighting. On training mats, sparring pairs fought with odd bladed weapons – fencing sabres, except with long curved hits that terminated in another, shorter blade. Coaches and other women stood by watching, while other trained with weights and treadmills and practice dummies.

“Oho!” Joseph nodded appreciatively through a bite of caviar brucetta. “You didn’t tell me you kept gladiators here. Back home, I’ve got this beautiful little doll whose specialty is the whip, did I ever tell you?”

~ “*Look closer,*” ~ Takamori was intent, ~ “*You’ll see they have all been injured in some way. These woman are not capable of battle anymore, but they can serve another purpose. They are potential candidates for human hybridization.*” ~

That got Joseph’s attention, “You don’t say.”

~ “*A hybrid has strength and speed exceeding even that of a kamui, and a regenerating body that never dies. Like Lady Ragyo. Or like Ryuko.*” ~

“So you do have a plan to kill her after all,” Joseph nodded. He surveyed the hall; there must have been hundreds if not thousands of candidates stretching out across its depths. “It must be a longshot though, otherwise you would have already done it.”

~ “*It is. Enough to which I’m not sure it’s possible. You can hybridize an infant quite easily, this is how Ryuko was made, but an adult requires complete supplication to the life-fibers. A rebellious psyche will be destroyed. These women are all true believers, but still. So far even that hasn’t been enough. But we will keep trying.*” ~

Joseph’s eyes narrowed, “And what happens if you do succeed, may I ask?” He looked piercingly at Takamori, “I have no illusions about what your people truly believe. I know, the Cocoon Sphere is impossible now, but what about your more recent activities. You told me the Ring of Fire was meant to cripple the Matoi regime’s food production with ash, but their propaganda says that it’s something else. They say Ryuko can’t die until all life is wiped from the Earth, there’s some kind of an “anchor” to this planet she has. So, what’s to stop another hybrid, under your control, from just ripping the crust off the Earth blowing the whole planet apart?”

~ “*That’s just propaganda,*” ~ Takamori shrugged. ~ “*You never wondered why our kamui can’t do that themselves? They’ve told us that even if they tried, they would be pulled down to the Earth’s core by gravity and be entombed there, never to escape. And besides, that was never our aim,*” ~ Takamori saw skepticism in Joseph’s eyes.

“You know, I’m not very inclined to devote my considerable resources to those that wish me dead. Even if we do have enemies in common.”

~ “Look, Joseph. You misunderstand us. The chance at paradise is over, gone. You think I want to die? There’s **nothing there**. No, we’ve talked about this. We both know the Earth can’t support human civilization much longer. We’ll survive on this diseased planet by building arks for ourselves and our few devoted followers. After the fall comes, it will be us, or possibly our children, who emerge from our enclaves to tame the few remaining savages and inherit the world. That’s always been your plan, hasn’t it?” ~ Joseph nodded, ~ “Right. So can you blame us, for hastening the fall? The ash will not last forever, even if we had managed to erupt more than a single volcano.” ~

“Hmm. But you still feel the need to kill Ryuko for your life-fiber patrons, huh?”

~ “If we do not destroy her, then when the time comes to reclaim the world we’ll just find her and her daughter waiting for us. They’ll turn the survivors to worship them like the gods of old. And yes, their true attention will be turned towards the stars, towards waging war on the life-fibers for control over the universe. You see what I mean, right? What’s good for them is good for us in this case,” ~ Takamori said.

“Yeah, maybe,” He’d known Takamori long enough to know that he wasn’t the sort to trust. But he’d also known him long enough to feel certain that he was an important benefactor to REVOCS, the type that would get through the bullshit if he really demanded it. That all sounded truthful enough.

~ “So, you see that there are three options ahead of us. First, our kamui. They won’t succeed. Then, creating another hybrid. This may not succeed either. Then there is the final way, creating kamui of the ‘bonded’ type. Like Ryuko’s kamui.” ~

“What’s the difference?”

~ “The difference is these kamui have been spliced with the human DNA of their wearer. Somehow, it is said that this gives them human minds, that human adaptiveness our kamui lack. It seems impossible, but events have shown us that it must be true. We could create our own bonded kamui, given to our own hardened soldiers. So far Ryuko has been sparing with her gifts, only granting kamui to family and those she deems worthy. You don’t have a use for such stringent recruitment standards, do you?” ~ Takamori asked.

“No, not at all,” Joseph murmured. “So this is what you’ve been driving at all along. You want me to finance an army of these ‘bonded’ kamui, huh?”

~ “Not just finance, but lead. It would be sacrilege to my people, to create such a thing. But for you... well, you have hundreds of thousands of hardened marines who will obey you to their dying breath. Surely one of them has the skills to defeat Ryuko.” ~

Yes, of course they did. She was just a woman who happened to have been given unearthly powers. “What use would she be against a real soldier?” Joseph smirked. “Well, you’ve got me interested.”

~ “Good. Because truth be told there is a roadblock here too. The secrets to making a bonded Kamui are locked up in that... infernal laboratory they have. Now, that is a tough nut to crack.” ~

Joseph said, “I’ve heard as much. That place is the center of their power, isn’t it?”

~ “And it’s not just the kamui that guard it. There’s something else, a new technological advancement we’ve made. The reason we’re completely off the grid here. The reason your Thousand Eagles were discovered so easily.” ~

“So it’s really true? They’ve made a true Artificial Intelligence. They really have all gone mad, huh?”

Takamori waved a dismissive hand, ~ “Oh, I assure you that is but the least of the crimes against humanity committed in the ‘Kinue Kinagase Memorial Research Complex’. But it is the most dangerous. To even approach the place will require the commitment of all our kamui and all our mortal forces too. But if we *were* to get in, to get just a single photograph of the device they use to construct kamui, their secret could be ours.” ~

“It’s going to take one hell of a diversion,” Joseph said. Now that he understood what Takamori wanted of him the opportunity thrilled him. To lead an army of kamui. Why, once he took care of Ryuko there would be *nobody* who could stop him. He wouldn’t need to hide in a bunker while the world ended. Let them try to take the throne from him. He would be the god the savages worshipped. “Maybe you could use some American aid?”

~ “... Perhaps I shouldn’t have spent so much time on preamble,” ~ Takamori said with satisfaction. ~ “We’re of the same mind. I will compile a list of the vehicles and supplies we need. But you shouldn’t be directly involved in this. You’ll need time to get Kamui production up and running. Not to mention that your plan to get the American public on your side fell short.” ~

“Ugh! I know!” Joseph grumped, “If she had retaliated openly, I could have sold it. But now it will take some time. The masses still think she’s Jesus, it’s a fucking curse she’s given me.”

~ “So get to work. Get your pundits, your fearmongers, your useful idiots in line. Maybe at first they’re just be reporting a little negatively on happenings in The League. Then they’re ‘just voicing concerns’ about Matoi’s intentions. Before you know it, you’ll get the stupid apes to believe Matoi is the antichrist in the flesh.” ~

“You know, I could use a head start if you have one. There’s got to be some dirt on this woman. Maybe Ryuko likes little girls, maybe she had her father bumped off and he wasn’t killed by Nui. If you’ve got something like that, I’d have a lot more to work with,” Joseph said slyly.

~ “I’m afraid not,” ~ Takamori said. ~ “Make up whatever you want, but if she had any dark secrets that AI of hers has long since eradicated any trace of it from the internet.” ~

After a moment of thinking, Joseph said, “What if they were sisters? Ryuko and Satsuki?” Takamori’s digital voice mimicked laughter and he said, “I mean, Ryuko was created in Ragyo’s labs, it’s not impossible. The incest angle always plays with the masses.”

~ “That’s clever, it really is. But come on. It’s too out there. Nobody’d ever buy it. But it doesn’t matter anyway, you don’t need things like that. What she’s trying to do is enough. Making her daughter an inhuman hybrid like her, and soon enough as many newborn babes as she can get her hands on. She’s trying to create a new species, the next stage in human evolution. Nobody’d be happy to hear they were being left behind on that, hm?” ~

“Heh, maybe you’re right about that,” Joseph rubbed his chin as he thought, then said, “Well, it sounds like we can help each other after all.”



~ “So glad we’re in agreement,” Takamori leaned over, extended a hand. ~ “ Just wait, Joseph. We can deliver an army capable of destroying Matoi to you. But the details... those I must work on with my people. I think we’ve covered all the basics. You’re welcome to stay and watch, but if you’d like I believe some of the girls you had last night would be happy to see you again.” ~

“Well, that’s quite an offer,” Joseph stood and made for the elevator, “I gotta say, these ‘born in the cult’ girls you’ve got are something else. The way they go at you - never seen anything like it.”

~ “Of course. It’s their sacred duty.” ~

Joseph laughed. “Quite a way to live.”

As he left, he noticed one of the women fighting on a mat near the viewing chamber. Missing an arm, but despite that she kept three adversaries at bay at once. Bone pale skin, blonde hair that flowed lustrously, a perfectly toned body that moved with a level of poise and grace her adversaries couldn’t match. She danced between them, caught one of her adversaries with a blow to the throat. Before Joseph’s eyes her sword flick forward, the back half of the hilt swinging forwards on a hinge, and the short blade on the other end scissored across, decapitating the poor woman.

“Whoa! Are they supposed to kill each other?”

Takamori shrugged, ~ “Well, no. But it’s fine.” ~

“That one looks pretty good. I reckon she’ll survive the strain just fine if the life-fibers accept her.”

~ “Of course she will,” ~ Takamori said proudly. ~ “She was a Kiryuin.” ~

~~~~

October 2068

~~~~

In a remote mountain pass in the Tanggula mountains in western China, an outpost reported in. They had spotted the REVOCS army. Trudging along on foot. Waving flags of surrender.

That surprised Nonon as much as anyone. She alighted on the dusty desert earth nimbly, Uzu right behind her, and the lieutenant in charge of the outpost immediately dropped to a knee.

“Huh, good work lieutenant...”

“Rinako, my Lady, my Lord,” She bowed even deeper. Before them, past the outskirts of the abandoned village, the REVOCS army had pitched camp. Thousands of crude tents, filling the valley.

“Well Lieutenant Rinako, I expect you’ll all get medals for this. But don’t get too excited, things are very weird here. On my flyover it looked like it was just the mercenaries and locals left, all the true believers have bailed. The kamui too,” Nonon said.

Uzu nodded, “Probably good luck for you on that one.”

“We noticed that as well, my Lady. They said they’d been abandoned and wouldn’t stop marching until they found someone who would give them food and water even if we killed them. We tried to help but there’s not enough of anything to make a dent. We’re getting by on scraps as it is.”

Nonon surveyed the horizon. There was a quick exchange between kamui.

*[These people are all dead weight now. Noncombatants. How can we help them survive?]* Seijistu asked.

*[First things first, we need to figure out where our real enemies went. Something changed.]* Saiban was frustrated. He and Nonon had been eagerly awaiting the day that the REVOCS retreat lead them right to the front door of their base. Now it looked like that had slipped away again.

*[Orders from HQ?]*

*[Must have been. Let’s see if they were stupid enough to let it slip to the rank and file. They’re more likely to talk now, while they’re desperate, than when they’re back home with their crimes forgiven.]*

*[That’s true but, Saiban.]* Seijitsu implored him, *[We’re not using water as a bargaining token here.]*

Saiban had to agree, that wasn’t acceptable, *[No, no we won’t do that. Not now, not ever. We’ll get them out of here. But while we wait, we might as well talk with them, right?]*

Nonon grunted and declared, “These men are prisoners of war. They will be afforded the full hospitality and care that we can provide. We’ll give them food and water and transport back to civilization, then their role in the REVOCS organization can be assessed and judgement can be passed.”

Uzu nodded and put a hand to his earpiece, calling in a fleet of dropships to extract the remnants of the REVOCS army.

Meanwhile Nonon addressed Rinako, “You said they told you this? Who did they send as a representative?”

The representative turned out to be just another of the rank and file, a quick-witted woman of short, squat stature with calloused hands and a creased, wind-chapped face. She was sharing a drink with the sergeants when Nonon burst in the tent. With Saiban still powered up, she was a shocking, radiant presence. All immediately dropped to their knees.

“You’re the REVOCS rep?” She asked bluntly. The woman nodded and Nonon yanked her up by the arm, “You and I need to talk.”

“O-of course, my lady, anything!” The woman blurted.

Nonon turned to regard the other officers. “Good work,” She said, “but save the booze, alright? Plenty of time for that later, but you’ve got to pack. There’s transport on the way to bring you home as we speak. “

“Is the war over?” One of the sergeants, a slight built Indonesian man, asked.

“Fuck no! The baddies ran away again is all. But we sure as hell don’t need you guys out here in the middle of nowhere anymore,” Nonon said as she breezed out of the tent. Then, to the REVOCS representative she said, “So what, after months they just got bored and went home?”

Outside, Nonon’s and the woman’s feet scuffed roughly as Nonon dragged her to stand in the open, in the middle of the town, “Lady Jakuzure, I – I just fixed the helicopters, that’s all I -”

“No, no I know you’re not real REVOCS, don’t worry. But just... give me some idea what happened here, okay?” Nonon said, blowing air out through her nose as she tried to calm down. *Months without any sudden moves, and now this? It feels like they’ve got a plan, like if we aren’t careful we’ll be on the back foot again.*

“Okay,” The woman held out a hand to steady herself. The terror at being in front of a clearly impatient Nonon Jakuzure was getting to her. “F-first, you have to know they didn’t tell us anything. It was just we followed orders, or our families would be enslaved to build those... things. S-so it was just one day, we woke up because we heard all the helicopters and other transport warming up their engines. And just like that, without a word, they took all the REVOCS true believers and just lifted off... left us. Headed north, but asides from that we couldn’t say. They didn’t give us a word for what we should do. It seemed pretty clear they had no use for us anymore though.”

Nonon put a hand to her chin, looked to the sand in thought for a moment. “North. That’s not much to go on. Did anything seem off about them beforehand?”

The woman made a kind of “pssh” noise, “Off? Just about everything about them was off. But they always received orders through a secure coms channel, so we didn’t exactly know where we were headed next. They must have received this order the same way.”

Nonon could see any lie in her eyes. Uzu, who’d been silently appraising the conversation while leaning on the side of the tent, shrugged. That was a sign to Nonon that they really were getting the whole story. These former REVOCS soldiers were just as confused as she was.

“Huh,” Nonon murmured as she looked out over the now bustling plain. The helicopters were visible in the distance, some even beginning to land. The army they had been hounding for weeks just suddenly evaporated. It felt like the entire war had just suddenly evaporated. “Well what the hell?”

# The Night of Their Lives

## Chapter Summary

Ooh boy we're back. Barely edited because I had to squeeze writing this in between my end-of semester work, please point out any typos. And as always let me know what you think. This marks the beginning of the Finale series for Part 2, so I hope to get these out at my old schedule but I'll take my time where I need to in order to ensure quality

Discord: EnhLut\_spare#5463

October 2068

~~~~~

“Ryuko! I can still hear the guitar you know!”

Ryuko rolled her eyes. Satsuki’s voice drifted in from the bathroom again. “You said you were about to start getting ready!” She called, voice lilting with just a hint of a nagging undertone. *Already practicing for when soon enough she’ll be telling Nozomi to eat all her vegetables or something in that exact same tone*, Ryuko thought, *God, she’s so precious.*

*I only wish she weren’t practicing on me.*

She strummed another chord. “What’s all the rush, anyway!” Ryuko called back. “It’s not like we have to get dressed, anyway!”

“We both know how long you take with makeup,” Satsuki said. The faucet shut off, and she shoved through the halfway-open bathroom door with her body – clothed only in a towel – while in the process of affixing a silvery ear cuff to the rim of her upper ear. Ryuko was floating as though reclining on a couch, an acoustic guitar held in front of her, so the fretboard rested diagonally across her belly. Walking was just so unwieldy now, Ryuko wasn’t going to bother with it anymore until this ordeal was done. Satsuki frowned up at her. “And you’re still in pajamas. We can’t be late for this, you know, it’s *your* fashion show. They’ll just wait until you show.”

Ryuko wanted to shout that she didn’t want to go at all. She didn’t want to be seen in public like this! And she certainly didn’t want to go to a huge fashion show attended by hundreds of teeming socialites, behind any of who’s smiling face could be hidden some new scheme to kill their child. But those reasons weren’t ones Satsuki would accept – Ryuko would honestly be a little disappointed if she did.

So instead, she said, “Hey, take a listen to this,” And began playing. She picked an upbeat Latin guitar solo, very technical. But Ryuko executed it flawlessly, both the slower, melodic parts and the dizzyingly complex parts that required her to hold long notes on some strings while playing intensely fast riffs on others. Satsuki crossed her arms, but she was smiling, nonetheless.

“That’s amazing, Ryuko,” Satsuki said sweetly when the solo was done, “You’ve come a long way in such a short time.”

“Eh, I’ve still got a long way to go yet,” Ryuko shrugged with a proud grin. “I mean, Nonon says so, but it’s also true enough. I have good technical skill but that comes easy to me. I’m still mastering the *musicality*, you know?”

“It’s still good enough for you to *serenade* me whenever I want,” Satsuki said, and Ryuko giggled in response. But then Satsuki sighed and said, “Do you really not want to go, dear?”

Ryuko drifted down to ground level, setting the guitar on the bed and putting her arms over Satsuki’s shoulders. “I don’t know. No. I mean, I don’t *now* but – ach! Why couldn’t it have been scheduled a couple weeks from now?”

“It comes at the same time every year.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And besides, in a week’s time we’ll have our hands full,” Satsuki smirked, running her hands around Ryuko’s hips.

“Don’t remind me,” Ryuko muttered, “But still...”

“I know,” Satsuki purred, drawing Ryuko closer into a hug. “But you’ve got to get out of the house. It might as well be for this.”

Ryuko nodded. Since the poisoning incident, she’d become a shut-in. She still made trips down to the lab to watch the others spar and absorb more life-fibers, but that was practically a second home and the way she nervously darted in and out made it clear even that was pushing it. She knew it, everyone knew it, and she hated that everyone knew it. It was the worst with Satsuki, Ryuko couldn’t stand that soft look of pity. Satsuki knew Ryuko didn’t want her pity, but she couldn’t help it, and as much as Ryuko wanted to tell her, “*I’m just being safe, it’s no big deal,*” it felt hollow. Satsuki knew that what she was being safe from – that one moment of sheer panic when Ryuko was sure it was already too late – was so horrible that avoiding it passed from mere caution into desperate need.

But it’s not like Ryuko could blame her. Without her, this whole ordeal would’ve been hell.

“All your hard work on stage, not the mention the historical costume act, why half the outfits they’ll be showing today are yours!” And here she went again. Ryuko smiled in spite of herself – if one good thing had come of being a shut-in, she finally had all the time for fashion design she could want. “Won’t that be rewarding? I’m sure that once you’re there, you’ll get lost in your work and all the glamor and you’ll forget everything weighing on your mind.”

“Heh. I ain’t feelin’ too glamorous right now,” Ryuko spread her arms in a shrug. Her hair was a mess – more than usual – and her middle was, well, larger than she recalled Ragyo ever getting with either Satsuki or herself. Honestly a little terrifying. And the room was in no better state, littered with open sketchbooks and pens, fabric and mannequins, sewing kits and thread.

“Nonsense. I saw the designs you have planned for you and I tonight, even though I think you tried to hide them,” Satsuki said slyly, and Ryuko chuckled with an eyeroll that said, “*eh,*

*maybe*". "You'll turn more heads than the models, don't worry."

Ryuko still didn't look convinced, so Satsuki made a fist and said, "Ten more days, right? You've got this!"

"Yeah," Yeah, *that's the problem. Ten more days and then it's the moment of truth. We find out if I'll have my daughter the way she's supposed to be, or if the hybridization procedure just won't work.* Ryuko didn't know which would be worse. Now that she'd had time for it to sink in, Ryuko knew that Satsuki had been right. Nozomi had to be like her, that was what Ryuko *wanted*. She couldn't explain why (and that did kind of scare her) but then she didn't have to explain it to anyone. It was the only way. And the only way to keep her safe from evil humans; REVOCS, the Americans, whoever. *But that's just changing one enemy for another. One we might never be able to beat, even in a million years.* She wanted to scream, *She's not even born and already she has enemies, how could I let it be this way?* Ryuko could – and had – spent days darkly mulling over these very, very limited options.

It loomed so large in her mind she could barely even process the actual practicalities that were about to unfold. *I'm about to have an actual baby, an actual child who's going to be mine to care for for the rest of forever.* That was too much to even think about, there was just this huge... gulf in Ryuko's mind when it came to what a child needed, not just food and education but the connection, the care. Now it was so easy to show her love, all she had to do was eat and breathe. She knew plenty of other parents, what they did, but - *I'm supposed to do that? Me?* She couldn't even picture it, and that was just – *no, don't think about it.*

*When does the part come where I feel ready for this?*

"Speaking of glamorous, these have gotten bigger," Satsuki snapped her from her worried thoughts by grabbing Ryuko's breasts with a smooth little hum-chuckle.

"Hey!" Ryuko gasped with playful indignance, "What, is that the kind of 'head turning' I'm supposed to get?"

Satsuki huffed, "Hardly. That observation was *just* for me. Now come along, I'll go without you if you really make me. It just won't be much fun."

~~~~~

They flew there, naturally. Zooming in parallel, low over the Tokyo skyline. After plenty of practice, Ryuko had gotten used to steering the flight mode of Satsuki's outfit in a way similar to muscle memory. So when Satsuki was taken by an ecstatic urge to swoop down under a pedestrian bridge or skim right along the glass face of a skyscraper, Ryuko easily obliged her. And Ryuko joined her too, reveling in the way the people below stopped in their tracks, whipped their heads up in shock and awe.

Ryuko felt that nervous pressure lift from her. *Nobody can get me up here,* She thought, *I'm too fast, too aware. No matter how many enemies I have, or Nozomi has, we'll always have the sky as our sanctuary.* And what a lovely sanctuary it was! Blue sky was finally poking through after a week of cool autumn rains, creating a busy patchwork cloudscape. Ryuko couldn't quite get over just how huge those billowing cumulonimbus precipices were. And it was so easy and free to move here. With her unnatural means of flight, her currently less-than aerodynamic figure didn't slow her down at all. She could stream through the air, twisting and turning and trailing light like a firework.

And below, her keen eyes could pick out every detail of the city. The traffic along the roads, the people milling about inside buildings and on the many layers of walkways and balconies. She could see the flow of commerce – where the delivery trucks arrived, where the people bought their food and clothes and everything else, where they worked to make and sell it all, where they went home and used all those things. Blood in the veins of a huge beast made of concrete and steel.

*Not too different from how my true form looks, or the life-fiber network for that matter, Ryuko reflected. From this distance she could observe things like that with clarity. Spires not woven but with glass windows, webs of asphalt instead of luminous membrane, and all motivated not by immaterial energy but living people. Humanity was given civilization by the life-fibers, so I guess it only makes sense that our cities would be like replicas made from materials available here on Earth.*

It wasn't hard for Ryuko to know which she preferred. The cities of humans were crude by comparison but goddamn it they were real! The shared work of the many, always in the process of being torn down and remade. Not the inscrutable art project of a single alien intellect (though she did also enjoy having her own 'art project', to be fair). *But which will Nozomi like more? She and I won't be the last hybrids, I guess that's inevitable now, so will there be a future where cities like this aren't necessary anymore? Where the Earth itself isn't even necessary anymore?*

~~~~~

The fashion show they were going to was a major annual event in the industry, but this was the first time the Matois were hosting it. The venue they rented out was a major art museum, with huge wide stairs lined by statues and a façade of art-deco carved lines and illuminated glass. Ryuko and Satsuki gently touched down on the red carpet, quickly shifting from flight forms into the elegant gowns Ryuko had prepared for them. The other guests, arriving via limousine, stepped back in awe and bowed, which Ryuko quickly waved off with a smile. Crowds were gathered behind a row of security guards – reporters and robed Matoists and regular people. A huge cheer immediately went up, but Ryuko could pick out some of the questions from reporters in the first row.

“Are the rumors of the attempt on your life true?”

“Is the war against REVOCS over?”

“When is your baby due? Will you hybridize her immediately?”

They already knew all the answers to those questions, and really just wanted her reactions. But Ryuko was used to not responding to that. Instead, she rose just slightly off the ground so everyone could see her and gave an exuberant wave. The reporters were drowned out once again by the roaring crowd that filled the street and sidewalks.

“Geez, lookit what that chick's got on,” Ryuko nodded, and out of the corner of her eye Satsuki saw a young girl in what looked like a short dress with a scissor blade pattern across the breast. “Talk about fast-fashion, I think I can see the brand label from here. And where it ends, I mean I get it's meant to be short, but it looks like she just forgot pants.”

Satsuki couldn't help but chuckle, “Well, don't blame her, she just wants to show she's a fan of yours. They all do.” There were plenty more people out there who were wearing simpler Ryuko-themed T-shirts and the like. “There isn't really a set dress code for them, unless they're the

religious types who wear just the robes and nothing underneath. I'm sure you see why not everyone wants to be affiliated with that."

"Hah! So, what am I supposed to do," Ryuko snorted, "Start producing merch? Is that even allowed for a queen?"

"I don't know, but wouldn't you have fun with it?" Satsuki said as they proceeded up the stairs, "Designing T-shirts and buttons and things like that? Ah, here they are." As they entered the art museum, they quickly spotted the rest of their friends milling around, talking with the other guests. They were the center of attention already: Ira and Mako chatting with some Tokyo socialites, Rei and Aoi in a deep conversation with a mutual friend of theirs, Aikuro and Tsumugu over at the bar getting drinks for the group (well mostly Tsumugu was taking care of that while Aikuro chatted up a pretty fashion designer). They all noticed Ryuko and Satsuki immediately – hard not too, they were the most important people in any room they were in.

"Ryuko! There you are!" Mako bustled through the crowd and hugged Ryuko, "You both look great!"

"Mako! Uh, sorry we kept you waiting," Ryuko gave her a squeeze and gently straightened the simple silver-blue tiara on Mako's head. "You guys look great too!"

"You think?" Mako giggled. At a fashion show like this, even the guests were expected to look their best, but when you had a kamui there wasn't much improvement left to do to the outfit. Mako had managed to accessorize with dark lipstick and fashionable sunglasses and Aoi was wearing a dress that Ryuko had designed for her, but the rest of them were just wearing their kamui and were plenty attention getting like that. "What's up?" Ryuko called to the rest of the group, "Thanks so much for coming!"

"Of course!" Aikuro tilted his cocktail in a casual little salute, "I consider it a priority to know what's in vogue at the moment. Useful tool for the bachelor life, take notes Rei."

"Oh shut up," Rei laughed, "Just because you're single doesn't mean you have to play the dating game every day!"

"No? Then what about that lovely young lady you and Aoi were talking with?"

"Not at all what you're thinking. I'm allowed to have friends without kamui you know!" Rei shot back.

But while the rest of them seemed to be getting on quite well, Ira and Tsumugu seemed rather stiff and uncomfortable. Ryuko grinned, "And you guys got dragged here too, huh?"

"Nonsense, I'm happy to support your artistic endeavors," Ira said, but he rolled his eyes and Ryuko gave him a knowing elbow in the side.

"Ah, just wait. You'll find something to entertain you."

Before the show proper began, there was time remaining for Satsuki to guide Ryuko around to make their greetings to the guests. This was always a laborious process, everyone wanted to talk to The Girl who Saved the World. Or just be seen near her, not everyone had much to say. It had been worse lately too, Ryuko kept having to field the same questions about her baby. Some fools had even tried to touch her belly! Satsuki had mixed thoughts about the whole thing



because on the one hand it was a wonderful new experience to be seen in public with her pregnant wife, but on the other it required her full restraint to stop from shouting, *“Leave her alone! Can’t you see she’s got enough on her mind?”*

Today was a bit different though. Ryuko’s energy was a lot more enthusiastic than usual. These guests, many of whom were famous fashion designers, were people Ryuko actually wanted to meet. And they had something to actually talk about to. It was actually kind of nice to be the one out of the conversation loop, barely keeping up with Ryuko’s jargon and industry trends.

But Satsuki was the only one who could tell that all was not perfectly well. As much as she wanted Ryuko to let go of her worries, it didn’t work like that. Ryuko was clutching to Satsuki’s elbow just a bit too tight. And only Satsuki noticed the imperceptible way she flinched right before passing each window – a superhumanly quick pause to scan for snipers. She was imagining assassins in every shadow. And that was the worst because Satsuki just didn’t know what to do about it. Ryuko was a nervous wreck, and she was powerless to change that. *Just ten more days until she’s back to normal*, Satsuki held on to that, even though she knew due dates didn’t work that way.

“Oh shoot, is that who I think it is? Liza!” Ryuko shouted, and the former princess of Australia came bustling over, looking as starstruck as ever. But Ryuko actually hadn’t recognized her at first. Previously, Liza had come to these major events wearing fabulous gowns that complimented her long blonde hair and innocent green-grey eyes in a fittingly old-school way. But now she wore a bright red cut-off jacket over a form-fitting black tank-top and shorts over similarly shaded black tights. Fashionable, definitely fitting, but not at all what Ryuko had expected

“Your majesty!” Liza bowed confidently. She seemed much more at home like this

“Gosh, I haven’t seen you since... uh... so how are you?” Ryuko asked hesitantly.

“Very well, thanks to you,” Liza nodded vigorously. Ryuko looked confused though and so Liza went on, “My whole family’s been set up here in Tokyo, we’re settling in very well. Well, y’know, except my uncle did die in the revolution, but thanks to you he was the only one!”

Satsuki nodded subtly to Ryuko. Yes, this was indeed something that had been seen to. So Ryuko overcame her awkwardness and cheerily said, “Oh, well I can’t take the credit for that personally, but you don’t need to thank me. I’m just happy to hear you landed on your feet.”

“Of course, but I just wanted to thank you anyway. And for inviting me tonight too! And congratulations!”

“Yeah, uh,” Ryuko hesitated a moment, gently pulling her aside so the nearest group of people couldn’t overhear, “Hey, listen... I’m, uh, sorry I kinda like, couped your dad.”

Liza froze, blinked, and then laughed, “Oh, please! You thought I was upset about *that*?”

“You’re not?”

“Hell no! I’ve known my father’s regime was wrong since I was, like, seven! Now my country is free, and I can live without having that hanging over my head. And you honestly did my dad a huge solid too, it was only a matter of time before some ambitious young general overthrew him and took the top spot. Besides, Tokyo is like, *so much cooler* than Canberra,” Liza said emphatically.

Ryuko blew out a big breath. Satsuki was right, Liza really was a pretty cool young woman. With that out of the way she loosened up immediately, “Oh, well that’s a huge relief! So, where do you usually hang? Anywhere I’d know?”

“Oh, well lately I managed to get into *S-Tier Rebuilt*. You heard of it?”

“Heard of it? It’s the place to be!” Ryuko said, and just like that they launched into a much more natural conversation than they had ever had previously. In fact, it lasted all the way up until the crowds began to filter from the main hall into the auditorium. Ryuko and Satsuki said their goodbyes to Liza, and as she hurried off Ryuko shrugged at Satsuki and with a grin said, “Nice!”

“You dork,” Satsuki laughed, and Ryuko couldn’t help join in.

~~~~~

“Wow, some place,” Rei said to Furashada as they entered the auditorium.

~ *[It’s huge, yeah. I had no idea the fashion design industry was this big.]* ~ He agreed. The auditorium was massive with a wide, operatic ceiling and a stage big enough to hold a parade; the kind of place where major awards ceremonies a grand stage-shows were held. A platform suspended above the runway held jumbotron tv screens so that the faraway seats could still see well, as well as innumerable lights that made the place very bright. Topped by the upbeat music (something Nonon had written, of course) it felt more like a pop concert than a fashion show. To Rei, anyway, but she’d only been to Ragyo’s fashion shows – operatic affairs, more like places of worship than fun events – so what did she really know?

The guests of honor – all the kamui wearers, of course, but also some of their relatives, friends, and some important local socialites and famous fashion designers – were seated right up by the end of the runway. Front row seats for the queen, and as Rei took hers it was easy to see Ryuko was practically salivating to get the show underway. Satsuki to one side, Mako on the other. From what Rei and Furashada could tell she had gotten over her recent anxieties. If not she must’ve been hiding them very, very well – not a Ryuko strong suit. That was a relief and she said as much to Aoi.

“I know,” Aoi nodded, turning around to Rei (the Kamui wearers and company were spread across two rows, so they could all chat without leaning over each other) “I could understand being nervous right now, but that was no state of mind for a young mom to be in.”

*My god, Ryuko, a parent.* Rei and Furashada thought. *I couldn’t even imagine it and now here we are.*

“Hey, Hououmaru,” A soft, dusky voice from Rei’s right made her jump slightly. A young lady in a cream-colored dress with bare shoulders and blue silk on the bodice settled down into the chair next to her.

“Oh! Haruka, hello! I barely recognized you,” Rei said, and it was true. Her long hair, usually a bit messy and unkempt, was shining and wavy and her jewelry complimented her dress with extra sparkle on her wrists and neck. And her dress, well it complimented... her, especially those slender shoulders. “You look, uh, that’s a really nice dress.”

“Good to see you alive too,” Haruka smiled, and Rei chuckled. This was a little bit of an inside joke between them – “Good to see you alive,” was the first thing Rei had said to Haruka after that whole unpleasant newspaper incident. “You look good too, it’s nice to see you’re back to wearing Furashada.”

“Yeah, we’re easing back into it,” Rei shrugged, “You can talk to him directly now, by the way. Say hi, Furashada.”

~ *[Hello Haruka,]* ~ Furashada said. His synthesized voice was low and gravelly like Rei’s, so since it was on the male spectrum it was low indeed. But still just as gentle as it sounded in Rei’s head.

“Ah!” Haruka yelped, “Holy shit he really does talk!” She scrambled to think of something to say, this was the first time she had to directly deal with Kamui being full people. “How is that even possible?”

“Oh, just a little bit of thread vibration-reading technology and a tiny speaker,” Rei said, “Don’t worry, you can talk to both of us the same way you always have, he doesn’t mind.”

~ *[Same set of ears,]* ~ He added.

“No kidding,” Haruka giggled nervous. “So, uh, bet you guessed I’m writing an article on the show, huh?”

“Why else would you be here?” Rei asked.

“Oh, shut up! You think I could’ve put up with Ryuko as long as I did without liking fashion at least a little? And there’s this ‘historical outfits’ section in the program which like, I mean what’s that gonna be?”

“I dunno, but she was pretty excited about that,” Rei said, “Well, if you’ve got questions ask away.”

“Ah, nah, not really. Guess I am kind of surprised the whole Kamui Corps isn’t here, I figured they would be,” Haruka commented as she scanned the surrounding seats, “What with the war being over and all.”

“It’s not officially over. And Ryuko was very chill about it, she knew there were some amongst us who wouldn’t exactly be that interested so it’s not like it was mandatory attendance. The rest of the crew are over at the lab, sparring or doing their research or what have you.”

“Even Nonon?”

“Oh, her especially,” Rei chuckled, “She’s an enigma like that.”

Haruka giggled and said, “Don’t I know it, I’m only her biographer.”

“This seat taken?” Another woman, notably taller than Rei, plonked down next to her. Now she Rei really didn’t recognize – blonde and buxom and... woah.

*Oh, she’s quite something by human standards, is she?* Furashada asked slyly in Rei’s head.

*Don't act all innocent, you've been around quite long enough to know what 'human standards' are,* Rei chided him.

"No, by all means," She waved a welcoming hand.

"Thank you, Lady Hououmaru," The woman leaned back to look over to Haruka, "And you –,"

"Oh, you probably wouldn't know me," Haruka said modestly.

"No, no, aren't you Haruka Naganohara? The one who does all the Kamui Corps profiles? I actually was wondering if you might be here," The woman said.

Haruka blinked, "Yeah! And I know you too, you're Liza Stanhardt, aren't you?"

"Shoot, did my accent give it away?" Liza grinned sheepishly, "Is it really that bad in Japanese."

"Not at all," Haruka said enthusiastically, "As it happens you're on my list too, I've had it in mind to pick your brains about your close encounter if REVOCS if, uh, if that's something you'd be okay with."

*Holy shit, that's where I've seen her before,* Rei and Furashada thought. "Oh, of course!" Rei interjected, "We met the once at the coronation! I'm so sorry I didn't recognize you."

"Don't be, happens all the time," Liza waved that off. Rei could see now that of course Liza had reinvented herself. Gone was the starry-eyed Cinderella act, but she still had the straight-backed confidence and ease of someone important. "Anyway, sorry to interrupt, I just wanted to see for myself."

"See... what?"

Liza made a little picture rectangle with her fingers and said, "Yup, you two make a cute couple after all!"

Rei and Haruka's faces went blank and a little red as they shared an uncomfortable look, then they both began laughing. "Oh no," Rei said, "We're not -," When she saw Liza's embarrassment she added, "I mean, thanks, but -,"

"- We're friends, but you've got the wrong idea."

Liza threw a hand over her mouth, suppressing an embarrassed laugh, "Ohmygosh, I'm so sorry! Goddamn, I just -," She threw up her hands, "Look, trying to learn a new language, and all the new social cues and stuff it's tough! And believe me my tutor is way less patient than my folks were the first time."

Rei laughed at that and said, "Don't worry about, no hard feelings, right?" Haruka nodded in agreement, "Now we're even for me not recognizing you."

"Sounds good. So then, does that mean you're, 'on the market?'" The lid's of Liza's eyes dropped as she said it.

*Wait a minute, no way she's serious right?*

“I-I’m sorry, what?” Rei stammered.

“A joke!” Liza laughed, “Sorry, sorry, guess it didn’t land.” Though evidently Rei was the only one who didn’t get it because Haruka was also amused. “But now that I think about it, you two together, that’d be kind of weird, right? Because didn’t both of you used to date Ryuko?”

Rei needed a moment to think about that. The thought of dating Haruka had never crossed her mind, not that she wasn’t cute enough. Haruka just knew too much; about Rei’s past, her difficulty getting over Ryuko. Hell, she’d helped her execute her whole crazy vendetta against Satsuki and Rei could only thank her lucky stars Haruka had forgiven her for that. Meanwhile, Haruka said, “Oh, I don’t know, but as friends it’s been a... bonding experience, eh?”

Bonding experience, hah! “You could say that,” Rei chuckled. “After all, if it weren’t for that we wouldn’t know each other. So you know it has that upside doesn’t it?”

“Say no more, I get it. I was engaged – er, promised to be engaged, I guess – to the other one. It’s a trip being around them, I know that much.” She leaned in close and said, “Though don’t tell anyone, but I would have just *slightly* preferred Ryuko. I’m sure you girls understand.” That got a laugh from both of them.

The lights began to dim, and Liza looked up and said, “Reminds me, I gotta give you my number real quick Haruka so we can link up and do that interview. It was the worst day of my life, but I think I’m good to talk about it now. Ah shoot, the show is starting, let me just,” She reached into her jacket pocket and drew out a wallet and a pen and jotted down some her cell number on a pair of cards – business cards for fashion boutiques she’d just gotten, it turned out. “Here you are, nice to meet you Haruka,” She handed the one off, and then the other, to Rei.

“What’s this for?”

“Just because I was joking, doesn’t mean you have to be,” Liza gave Rei a wink. “Up to you.”

Something in Rei’s chest jumped momentarily. Up until that moment, political betrothal to Satsuki aside, there was no way she’d ever thought this bombshell ex-princess was legitimately into women. This changed things. Rei tried not to smile too much and to sound smooth as she took the card and said, “I’ll have to think about that.” She didn’t notice though the expression on Haruka’s face, which was... she didn’t seem to know what expression to make so she ended with cheeks puffed out a bit and a worried frown.

“Well,” Liza stood, “My actual assigned seat is a couple rows back, so I guess I’ll be going now.”

Rei had the thought - or maybe it was Furashada, it didn’t matter - that this was an awful lot like with Ryuko, way back when they first met. Liza seemed to be much the same kind of free spirit – a bit different in personal flavor, a little more sophisticated. But still, considering Rei’s history that could be dangerous. *I have to go slow, this time. Let’s not even say I’ll go on a date with her; I’m not playing that game. Get to know her first.*

But to do that, she had to actually get to know her. Make a friend who didn’t have a kamui, that sounded easy right?

“Well hold on,” Rei said, “Why not stay? Nobody seems to be coming for the spot, and the show’s *just* about to start.”

As Liza sat down again, a row in front Satsuki's eyes darted back forward with a curious little smile. "Did you notice that?" She murmured to Ryuko, "Interesting development, no?"

"Oh yeah, I agree," Ryuko, who had overheard the whole conversation with her sensitive ears but hadn't given even a second of thought to interpreting it, said, "Rei and Haruka make a good couple. Good for them."

"Wha – Ryuko, no, it's the other way around."

"Shh... Sats! The show is starting."

~~~~~

The show was in full swing. Bright spotlights tracked the paths of the runway models as they strode up right in front of Ryuko, bowed, and just as confidently turned and made their exits. As the announcer introduced each of them, Ryuko gave her own comments audible only to Satsuki and Mako over the pulsing music. On her own designs she modestly explained the rationale, the "I was going for this," or "Eh, I'm not so happy with how the skirts turned out," type of things. But when a different fashion designer came along, she couldn't help but wonder aloud about every facet. She spouted obscure knowledge about who made the outfit before them, tried to guess based off it what they probably thought about recent trends, and was quick to praise or dump it knowing Satsuki and Mako could only trust her opinion. For a while, she nearly forgot about her worries and was simply engrossed.

But getting hungry brought her back to reality. There were waiters busy in the aisles, taking drink orders, and eventually dinner was served during a brief intermission. The queen, of course, had her own attendant, but while everyone around her kept the young lady occupied Ryuko waved her off over and over again. But not long after dinner, right as things were getting back underway, a noisy growl and a great big lurching kick reminded her that she might be immortal, but her daughter wasn't.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear ya," She grumbled to her stomach, "Hey, Sats?"

"Already on it," Satsuki said, digging into her handbag to produce a foil bag of seasoned pretzels. Ryuko ripped it open greedily.

"Ryuko *no!*" Mako gasped, horrified, "That flavor is so nasty!"

Ryuko shrugged, "Convenience store snacks can't be poisoned, they didn't know who they'd sell 'em to." She tossed a handful of pretzels into her mouth. "It's not *that* bad," She said to Mako, who just gave her a "*be honest*" look, "Really! Maybe it's my inhuman taste buds, I dunno."

The show wore on, and Ryuko with her energy restored quickly reverted to narrating everything. But on the Mako and Satsuki's other sides, Ira's and Tsumugu's spirits were flagging. Ira was doing his best to remain polite attention, but his bulky shoulders were slumping into his chair. He ended up watching Mako's beaming face, thinking, *At least she's having fun*. Tsumugu on the other hand was just drinking and talking with Aikuro, not even pretending to be watching.

~ "And now, to finish this evening's festivities, brought from all corners of the world and painstakingly restored for your entertainment, the Tokyo University Graduate School of Social Sciences is proud to present 'The Art and Armor of History!'" ~ The announcer stridently declared.

The curtains on the wide stage behind the runway lifted, and behind them stood a glittering assemblage of models, men and women. Dressed in the armors and high fashions of dozens of cultures from antiquity to just a century prior, they stood at attention. Medieval knights with lacquered gold and black plate, Persian immortals with shining scale-mail and blue silk sleeves, Napoleonic hussars with silver-trimmed shakos and bandoliers, and dozens of others each alongside their civilian counterparts both male and female. And of course, samurai from every century and region.

Ryuko grinned as Ira immediately sat up in his seat and Tsumugu's head whipped around. "Yo," Ira said.

"See? I told ya you'd find something to entertain you," Ryuko said smugly.

As before, the show continued, but only for a brief moment. The walk through history had only gotten through ancient Rome when suddenly Ryuko, Satsuki, and all the members of the Kamui corps felt their phones vibrate urgently and incessantly.

*\*RED ALERT: REVOCS FLEET APPROACHING JAPAN FROM THE NORTH – LANDFALL IN HOKKAIDO IN THREE HOURS\** Was all the message said – flashing across the entire screen as Misaki and Izanami seized control of each phone. Ryuko's stomach sank, as they all shared a sudden, urgent look.

*What? What the fuck does this mean? What are they planning now?* Ryuko thought. Fear gripped her, a minute fraction of what she'd felt in the moment she tasted the poison meant for Nozomi. But still a painful reminder. She was behind the curve; her enemy had a new plan and she didn't know what it was, whether to be worried. *What am I supposed to do? Oh no, have I lost my edge? Used to be I was always ready to act in just an instant!*

But the rest were not held back by self-doubt. They all shot to their feet, and with them the lights flicked on, and the music died. There was a collective groan of confused disappointment from the entire auditorium as everyone looked around in shock.

Satsuki was already on the phone, "Nonon. Are you at the lab?... Good, tell them to begin the nationwide lockdown... Very good. We will contact you again momentarily from a secure location."

*That's right,* Ryuko felt a flood of relief, *It's not all on me. But there is something I can do.*

The audience was on their feet now, looking around uncertainly. Ripples of fear spread through them – most were residents of Tokyo, so at some point in the past years they'd probably be in close proximity to a REVOCS terrorist attack. Was this another one?

Ryuko floated up above her seat, allowing her power to flow free, tracing wings behind her and grabbing everyone's attention. She looked down at Satsuki to steel her confidence and said, "Hey, yo! Nobody panic, you're not in danger! REVOCS is coming to invade Japan, but they're all the way north of Hokkaido. We'll meet them there and beat them there!" Murmurs from the crowd – invasion? Wasn't REVOCS near beaten? How could this be possible? "This is their last desperate stand! All of their strength against all of ours! And they don't stand a chance!" Ryuko didn't know if this really was their last stand, but instinct said it was. And the crowd seemed to like that if their roar of approval was anything to go by. "Tomorrow, their fleet will be at the bottom of the ocean, and our country will be at peace!"

With that reassurance, the audience and performers were much more amenable when soldiers entered, ready to lead them to underground bunkers where they could wait out whatever came next. Ryuko landed, and Satsuki gave her a confident nod. Yes, this is how things should be. They could weather one last trial together no problem.

~~~~~

“Well, we know what we’ve got to do,” Nonon said, stalking out of Aikuro’s conference room where they had just finished working out a plan with the rest of the team. She was flanked by Houka, Shiro, Uzu, Mataro, and Yuda, and they exited the main doors in time to watch the last evacuation bus shipping scientists away. “I’ve got to agree with what Satsuki said back there. This stinks of a diversion.”

Houka nodded, “It’s an old tactic for them, and I agree too that the only targets high enough priority to risk what must be just about all their remaining forces are Ryuko herself and this laboratory.”

“It’s the only way they or anybody else could possibly level the playing field with us now,” Uzu said, “Is to steal the secrets of how to make more kamui. Only, if they are going after Ryuko instead, is it really a good idea to let her go and observe the fleet battle?”

Nonon wasn’t paying attention. She’d shut her eyes and seemed to be concentrating on something. But Houka answered, “I think so. She’s faster than any of us in the air. If there is a danger to her, she’ll be able to sense it and fly to safety. They won’t expect this, either. It brings the fight to them.”

“Reminds me,” Shiro said, producing a tubular metal case from a hole that suddenly opened in a sidewalk panel, “You’ve got to fly up there, give Aikuro some of his hardened life-fiber arrows. He’ll need the extra ammunition.”

“Right,” Uzu rolled his eyes.

“They will probably send at least one of their kamui with the fleet, just to make sure we take it seriously. You won’t be wasted there –,”

“Shh! Shh-shh,” Nonon suddenly hissed, “Feel that?”

“...No?”

“You will soon,” She opened her eyes, “It’s Ranketsu. And a sortie of flying Ultima Uniforms backing it up. Looks like we were right. This is the real target.”

Uzu was clearly concerned. He put a hand on Nonon’s shoulder, “You sure you don’t want me to stay here?”

Nonon smiled back confidently, “Five of us, one of her? I think we’ll be alright.”

As Uzu reluctantly transformed and leapt into the sky, Nonon surveyed the rest of her team and began issuing orders, “Yuda. Stick close to me. This’ll be your first fight with a kamui who seriously wants to kill you. It’s not gonna be your last.”

“Got it, Lady Nonon,” He saluted.



“Mataro. You’ve got that instinct for when the enemy’s up to shit. Keep an eye out, in case they go for some secret second level of diversion or something.”

“I was gonna do that already.”

“Well whatever,” Nonon waved a dismissive hand, “If you see an opportunity to dip off their radar and pull a flanking move, you do that shit too.” Then she turned to Houka and Shiro. Not just standing at attention, they seemed to have a bit of a smugness to them. Houka’s collars were up, but Nonon could tell he had a sly smile on under that. “You two.”

“Yes?” Houka asked leadingly.

“This lab does have some kind of security lockdown, right?”

“Oh! Why didn’t we think of that ourselves?” Houka chuckled.

“Oh wait,” Shiro said as though he’d just remembered something. Not a moment later, the ground rumbled with a huge, metallic groan. The others looked up with a gasp.

The buildings were sinking.

Huge seams appeared in the lawns, widening into crevices that revealed a dark void below. Huge, spidering metal limbs flipped and rotated the buildings, tilting them as though caught in a calamitous earthquake until they were folded and dragged underground. Even the grass, the trees, the gardens and fountains began to sink, each piece dropping one by one as startled birds abandoned their perches.

“Holy shit,” Nonon mouthed, peering over the edge where the road in front of them had been. Down in the gloom, hundreds of feet below, a huge architecture of cranes and foundries and black boxes inside of which there must have been innumerable rooms all shifted, accepting new additions. Saiban reached out with his aura sensing – he could feel Ryuko’s kamui construction chamber sinking lower and lower into the recesses, and even lower than that Izanami’s and Misaki’s twin central processors. But their fingers ran all throughout this structure.

And then Nonon could see no more. A huge square slab of concrete lifted up, slamming into place right where the curb had been. All around them, hundreds more fell into place. The entire lab had vanished into the ground, replaced by a perfectly flat plain.

Well, perfectly flat except for one monolithic object that had replaced the central tower behind them. A loop of white metal about as thick as a truck, suspended on a platform lined with control panels, run through with lights and pulsing with a crackling electricity that Nonon could feel rattling her teeth.

Mataro blew out an appreciative whistle, “You guys really don’t take any half measures do ya? Ranketsu doesn’t even get to smash a single test tube. I’m honestly kinda disappointed, the lab coulda been a fun battlefield.”

“There’s nothing fun about ruining our colleague’s hard work,” Shiro said, holding up a finger.

“Yeah, but you guys missed a spot, no?” Nonon motioned at the huge circular structure behind them, “Isn’t that the damn particle accelerator you’ve been obsessing over for like a year,

Houka?”

“It is,” He answered smugly.

“So like, aren’t you worried it’s going to get wrecked?”

“Oh no, that’s the best part!” He said, “It’s a little surprise for Ranketsu, one we’ve kept secret even from you so that there was no chance REVOCS would get wind of it. You see, when at full power this device produces an electromagnetic field of extreme strength. Any *extradimensional* being unlucky enough to be cast into the dead center of this ring,” He flourished his hand towards the empty space in between the particle accelerator’s gleaming limbs, “Would be subjected to a force several hundred times stronger than Earth’s gravity, and completely immobilized.”

“Which means...” Nonon trailed off. No way, Houka wasn’t really suggesting what she thought he was.

“Which means the device has only one function: We’re going to catch a kamui with it.”

# Divine Wind: 1

## Chapter Summary

Should I continue with the fleet battle for the next one? Or check up on what Nonon and friends are up to instead? Both will happen just a question of the order.

October 2068

~~~~~

“Gosh, it’s getting so dark!” Mako exclaimed as she turned her head around to survey the horizon. She and Ryuko were standing on a towering levee – fifty feet of concrete sea-wall up from the raging surf. Ahead of them, blustery ocean with whitecaps barely visible in the fading western light. And behind, the port city of Shari stood still. All the lights were out, all the people gone. They had seen the last of the evacuation busses heading inland as they came in for a landing. There they would join thousands more, from every city across Hokkaido, heading to bunkers hidden deep in the mountains. It was like this everywhere, as Mako and Ryuko flew north to get here the cities below had grown progressively darker. Satsuki’s plans for a full-scale war, set years before, were now coming to fruition.

And now the whole nation laid in wait.

A squadron of silver fighter jets screamed by overhead, and as they did a small blue dot of light peeled off, descending to drop with a *\*whoosh\** next to Ryuko and Mako. It was Aikuro, and he said, “Well, the western perimeter is ready. You brought your earpieces Mako, right? Or can Tonbo make an ear protecting form? ‘Cuz I give it about an hour from when we start shooting to when you go deaf.”

Mako shrugged and shook her head, and Aikuro sighed and called for an officer from the nearest artillery battery to bring up a spare. His armored car rolled up along the empty street, he quickly passed it off, and then back he went to another point of light along the levee. Men bustled around the base of the towering barrels of artillery pieces, as they did everywhere. The sporadic dotting of the various batteries arrayed along the shore was the only source of light on land, and out to sea there was the distant glow of battleships in the west and east, and above twinkling lights from a host of aircraft.

As Mako affixed her earpieces, Satsuki came running along from the opposite direction, striding inhumanly quickly across the wide concrete walkway. She skidded up, taking her position beside Ryuko and giving her hand a squeeze. Ryuko passed her a tablet computer with a map of the region on it – tiny blue and red dots indicated the positions of enemies in real time. “All is well?” She asked Aikuro, and when he nodded replied, “Good. The eastern flank is proceeding to plan as well.”

“So, uh, what can I do?” Ryuko asked. Since they’d arrived, she and Mako had been practically forgotten in the rush to prepare. “Is it time for me to give some kinda rousing speech?”

“I’m afraid the moment has passed; this battle has already begun,” Satsuki said, face stone cold and serious. Ryuko and Mako both turned to her in surprise, and she pointed out over the horizon, “They’re out there, hiding from our guns behind the curvature of the planet.” If Ryuko squinted, she could just make out the faint glow of the as-yet invisible fleet approaching. “They have high velocity life-fiber shields to protect against our long-range missiles, but Tsumugu and our air forces are already out there, trailing behind them, picking off stragglers. Making it clear there’s no turning back. Soon, it will be impossible for them to turn and retreat without running into our fleet. At which point it will be time for kamui to settle things. They do have their kamui, don’t they?”

“I think...” Ryuko shut her eyes and tried to tune out everything but her aura sensing. It was tough, with Tonbo and Nekketsu so close, Ira and Rei up there in the sky somewhere, and Uzu on his was in from the south, but, “Yeah. They’re faint, must still be in their pods... So then, like, should I be here at all? If I’m not gonna inspire the troops and I’m not gonna fight, ain’t I just a target?”

“Ironically, this is the safest place you can be. You’re surrounded by our friends here, and just seeing you will give hope to our side,” Satsuki explained. “If you want, we can pull back further into the city.”

“Well, nah, if I’m here I wanna watch everything go down,” Ryuko shrugged. “I can’t believe it though. I need to be kept safe? Give me ten more days, just *ten*, and I’d be the one keeping everyone else safe. It’s not fair!” Well, it wasn’t just not fair. *Of course something like this would happen*, she concluded, *It’s not bad luck, it feels like an inevitability. It feels like something bad is going to happen.* It had been a while since she had such a distinctly uneasy feeling. Not since Honnouji. *But what can I do about it? Tell Satsuki? It is just a feeling, after all. They’re already doing everything they can.* She instinctively moved a nervous hand over her belly.

Aikuro leaned over to clap her on the shoulder, “Of course it’s not fair. They’re the enemy, they’re not gonna make anything fair. Don’t worry, we’ve got this.” They watched the distant shapes of the League fleet moving to encircle the enemy. “And for what it’s worth, I am glad both of you decided to come today,” Aikuro said. “You ought to be here at the end of this.”

“Well of course. Wouldn’t want it any other way,” Ryuko said with a wide smile.

“Mhm!” Mako agreed, “And I wanna help too! Even if it’s just cheering you on, there’s got to be a way.”

*[We even brought our weapon,]* Tonbo said, and Mako produced their baseball bat shaped club from one of Tonbo’s hidden pockets. It telescoped to full size, each part extending and popping into place with a hiss. *[Just in case it comes to that.]*

“It won’t,” Ryuko declared, and the others nodded in kind.

As the enemy fleet drew closer, Satsuki was kept busy with a constant string of calls from subcommanders on land and at sea. The general mood seemed to be a grim kind of confidence – Ryuko thought they were glad the kamui would be the first line of defense, not themselves. All their questions and reports were about minor details, nobody was about to dispute the overall strategy. Not only did it come from their commanding officer, the strategic mastermind Satsuki Matoi, but there was nothing to dispute, nothing overlooked. Satsuki answered every question

enthusiastically, her back jolted to rigid attention at each call and the traces of a smile were on her lips.

*She loves it. She hasn't lost her spark,* Ryuko glowed with pride as she took in the sight of Satsuki in command, framed against the sunset. It was the kind of sight that would make anyone want to fight and die for her, for humanity. *Her up here with her brains, me down there with my fists, that's how it should be.*

Uzu arrived just a few minutes after the REVOCS fleet came into view over the horizon. First the vague glow grew larger and stronger, then the domed shape of the high-velocity life-fiber shield rose like a pale, feeble sun, and finally the ships themselves appeared, ever-so-small. Like a row of serrated teeth chewing at the sky. *There must be hundreds,* Ryuko thought – she lost count in the high eighties and this was only the front line. And then Uzu dropped down beside Aikuro, wings rumpling as they folded up and returned to their cape form.

“How’s everything?” He asked seriously.

“All according to plan,” Satsuki answered. Ira and Rei, who were flying over the friendly fleet, arced around and began zooming back. They landed with a great gust of wind from Tekketsu’s wings of liquid stone and Furashada’s rocket thrusters.

“I brought this for ya,” Uzu dropped the metal cylinder he’d been carrying to the ground at Aikuro’s feet. With a hiss it popped open, revealing the quiver of hardened life-fiber arrows Nonon had tasked him with delivering. “You’ll probably need it.”

“Ah yes, I believe I shall,” Aikuro hummed. He carefully inspected one; rather than a single point, the arrowhead was shaped into two intersecting blades like a pair of garden shears. Then to Ira and Rei he asked, “How’re things looking out there? What are we up against?”

“Well, diversion or not, they’ve come prepared for a fight. Each battleship seems to have a standard battalion of airborne fighters – One-Star troopers, Two-Star officers, Three-Star commander, as usual – and from what we could see most had a squad of special forces in the Three-Star *Praetorian* model uniforms. Those are mostly at the front,” Ira pointed on Satsuki’s tablet, “Now, *maybe* they’re just cramming those uniforms on everyone they can get their hands on, out of desperation, but...” He trailed off with a shrug.

“They will attempt to leap across to shore once they are within range, likely all at once” Satsuki declared. “Each artillery battery is equipped with needle cannons and are ordered to hold fire until the bulk of them are in the air, to maximize effect.”

“So many, and with *Praetorians* which are hard to deal with in groups,” Ira said, “We will be hard pressed to keep them off the shore.”

“Which is why it is fortunate that we will occupy the enemy kamui with Uzu. What else?”

“Can’t see from here, but the sea around the fleet is crawling with their hybrid beasts,” Rei added. “They have landing craft which are just motorized cages for terrestrial kinds too. Didn’t see any whales like the one from Krakatoa, but there’s more than enough smaller creatures. Sharks, crocodiles, and some new ones too.”

“You don’t say,” Aikuro commented, scientific curiosity lighting up his eyes. “What’dya suppose they were?”

“Couldn’t say. Furry things, not huge though, maybe about car sized. Still, they must have cleared out pretty much the entire menagerie for this.”

“No matter. They are an expendable force used to sow terror, and so will be sent as the first wave of attack. We shall put the poor beasts out of their misery,” Satsuki said. “Tsumugu, what are your impressions?”

In the sky above the encroaching REVOCS fleet, the signs of aerial battle were emerging from the distance. Trails of smoke, flashes of light, plumes of fire as tiny planes and drones and flying Ultima Uniforms only Ryuko’s eyes could pick out careened past each other. Formations clashed, twisted as planes peeled off into the chaotic scrum of the dogfight, then reformed to turn right back into the fray. And in the center, blinking and flitting around seemingly at random, a tiny blur of crimson fire. And wherever it went, a cone shaped trail of explosions followed - bright spheres of light fading into smoke and shrapnel. This was of course Tsumugu, and he now spoke to the assembled group through their earpieces.

*~ “It’s hectic up here!” ~ He shouted, barely audible over the roar of gunfire, ~ “We’ve crippled a few stragglers that left the shield, but mostly I’ve been keeping their air escort occupied! The shield is being emitted by a carrier in the center, but they likely have backups! There’s a gap between the shield bubble and the water, I could squeeze through and take it out!” ~*

“No need buddy,” Aikuro answered, “We’ve got a plan for that.”

*~ “Copy that! The entire fleet will be within the kill zone in just another minute! Good luck everyone.” ~*

“Well Satsuki,” Uzu said as the enemy inched ever closer, “The whole Honnouji situation didn’t work out as planned, but looks like you still get to command your great battle for the fate of the world after all.”

Satsuki chuckled, “Hmhmhm. It’s funny, I expected it would happen on land. But not to worry, I’ve read the book on REVOCS’ naval tactics too. Literally, and even wrote some of it myself.”

Ryuko’s eyebrows raised skeptically, “What, seriously? You’re pulling my leg again ain’tcha Sats?”

“No, no this time I’m really not. Surprising, I know,” Satsuki smirked, but then shrugged and said, “Don’t let it alarm you. I have only improved with life experience. And it isn’t like I was about to give *REVOCS* strategies I didn’t already have a plan to beat. And I certainly never expected to encounter an enemy such as ourselves.”

She turned to address the group, “My friends, that is the key to our victory. Our un-empowered comrades are not helpless, but they cannot win this fight alone. You all know your missions. Uzu will tie up the enemy Kamui, Ira shall use Tekketsu’s *Kyojin* form to destroy the fleet, Rei will hunt the hybrid monsters and keep them from shore, Tsumugu will keep the sky clear, and Aikuro will shoot down anything that comes too close. Mako and I will remain here, if anything makes it to shore, I will dispose of it. Ryuko, I’m sure, will provide any help she can using her extrasensory abilities. Are there any last-minute questions, changes?” Everyone simply nodded with a

determined grunt, “Good. The we will trust our friends in the other team to protect our secrets, while we protect the people of Japan. And honestly, I chose to be here. You can tell which of these fights I believe is more important. Aikuro, make ready. It will be time to break the shield any second.””

“You got it!” Aikuro deftly strung a tiny glowing thread of Nekketsu’s life-fiber between the tips of his bow while Nekketsu subtly began to change form. Targetting reticles for herself and Aikuro emerged from his shoulder, and Aikuro shuffled across the sea-wall looking for just the right angle. “Ten... Twenty... Twenty-seven, all in a row,” He said with satisfaction as he nocked a hardened life-fiber arrow.

“Yeah speaking about that,” Ryuko wondered aloud, “You told me once that these shields were nuke resistant, so what’s the plan?”

“They are,” Aikuro answered.

~ *[Which only makes what I’m about to do cooler!]* ~ Nekketsu finished.

Before their eyes, the sleeve of Aikuro’s drawing arm detached itself, jointed fingers of threads wrapping around the arrow’s fletching. The fabric once wrapped around his bicep curled and fused at the ends into a tube, same for his forearm, and between them a swiveling mechanical hinge that whirred as both parts grew longer and longer. Just like at Krakatoa, she drew it back and as she did Aikuro’s bow unfolded – bladed edged popped open and a new layer emerged, only for it too to open and again expand. Trembling and straining with the magnitude of the stored force, the blow groaned as it buckled and bent all the way down to Nekketsu’s metal fingers – the lower tip carving a deep crevice in the seawall as it did. And the arrow stretched with a thin whine as Tsumugu began counting down.

~ “*Fire in Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Now!*” ~

### ***KRA-BOOM!***

A thick white shockwave blasted from Aikuro’s bow as it twanged back, releasing an arrow visible only as a tiny white distortion of the air. Ryuko grinned as she watched it sail away, *Goddamn, that’s fast even to me.* A pinprick of blinding light flashed into existence where the arrow pierced the life-fiber shield, and in the same moment a deafening, chaotic chain of explosions rocked through the REVOCS fleet.

Twenty-seven ships exploded as one. In a perfect line right through the middle of the vast flotilla, each was cracked and blasted apart from the inside out, keels lifted out of the water by the sheer force. Metal turned to liquid, rumpling and twisting into unrecognizable forms. The warriors onboard had no time to fly away. Some were spared by their uniforms’ shielding and flew up in swarms like birds from a felled tree. But not many.

The shield was in fact the last thing to go. The ugly rip Nekketsu’s Transonic Arrow left was there immediately, but the rest of it held on for just a second more. A huge, slowly drifting cone of swirling life-fibers had been emanating from the flagship – this was what fed the shield. With the ship now incinerated, that funnel narrowed, shortened, and when it was fully gone the entire field simply popped. Its solid outline became a fuzzy mist and soon that had become a mere red cloud, drifting ominously above the fleet.

Immediately Aikuro leapt into the air (always reposition after a shot) and Satsuki shouted into her earpiece, “ALL BATTERIES, BEGIN! TARGET THE REARMOST SHIPS AND SWEEP FORWARDS! CHOKE THEIR ESCAPE ROUTE WITH WRECKAGE!”

She really only did that to inspire the men though. They had begun shooting exactly according to plan the moment the shield dropped. The roar was deafening, and the shock of so many missiles and shells loosed at once sent the girls’ hair flying forwards into their faces. From the darkened shore, pillars of fire and smoke bloomed into the sky, fanning out into waves upon waves of blazing fireballs.

“Let’s go!” Uzu shouted, and as one the Kamui Corps surged forth, zooming low over the water. Beneath a carpet of twinkling missiles, they carved white, foaming canyons into the sea. The sheer speed of their travel whipped every stray piece of the kamui back, like human shaped torpedos, tipped with hardened life-fiber blades. And the *force* behind them! Their auras burned bright and hungry, drowning out all the little pinpricks from the Ultima Uniforms and beasts. Ryuko could practically see the kamui in their true forms, gigantic shadows behind their wearers. Like whales plunging into a swarm of krill.

“They’re coming! It’s starting!” Shouted REVOCS soldiers looking out towards shore. Gasps of fear and cries of panic echoed from every ship – they could feel the insurmountable gulf in power too, if more dimly than Ryuko. Pure instinct made even the most hardened cultists freeze in fear.

But only for a moment. Turrets whirled as they came to bear, unleashing a torrent of lead and missiles in a thick cone, whizzing all around the charging kamui. At first each of them dodged and slalomed separately but taking even one hit now would send them off-course and that kind of delay wouldn’t do. So Uzu pulled out to take the lead and the others snapped into formation behind him. There was a perfect path through the onslaught only his Shingantsu could see. So they flew single file, weaving through even as the entire front line of ships desperately broadsided them.

Nearly halfway across now. The artillery was hitting the rear of the fleet now, a wall of explosions and shredded metal blossomed on the horizon and crawled ever nearer. But all the kamui could feel a pulse of activity below the waves. The hybrids had their scent. Tarry black triangular sails and scaly, rolling armor plating emerged. The sea boiled and all those hidden creatures turned as one, surging forward. Their movement together created a huge wave, a smooth swell of water that carried immense surging force. And within, just below the inky surface mottled, roiling flesh and scales could be seen. Beady, thoughtless eyes and cavernous mouths glittering with snagged teeth. Stray artillery shells struck the creatures but they didn’t care. Skipping above, swarms of furry, serpentine things with bulging eyers and round mouths leapt like dolphins, eager to pluck the kamui from the sky.

“I got it! Otters! Those things were otters, isn’t that fascinating!” Aikuro shouted, thrilled by his new discovery.

“Leave this one to me!” Rei sped out front, dropping right down to the water. Furashada switched from rocket-propelled flight mode to normal combat mode, and Rei extended her legs as though water-skiing and skimmed along the surface as she readied her axe. “Huy-YA!” She barked as she swung with two hands and a full twist of her torso; the blade whipped out in front of her nearly instantly. And after a split-second delay the shockwave from such a powerful slash ripped everything in front of her to pieces. The water was cut in half, the top part of the wave lopped off and suddenly curling back on itself, rolling up hybrids into a bloody foam. The crest of it was so high that the still distant ships rocked and groaned. Below, the larger hybrids in her direct path had



been completely bisected – the lower halves of pulverized things that had once been sharks and crocodiles and other predators of the deep floated on the surface.

And the kamui corps charged on.

The ships were now slowly beginning to move to encircle them. And behind that, over the now thinly spread lines, the Japanese fleet was surging into action. Newer than the clunky REVOCS battleships and based off Nudist Beach technology, they cut through the water quickly with their thin, knife-shaped bows. Soon battle was erupting on all sides as shots began roaring in. But these were naval combats, long-distance affairs stretching miles. The picture of charging kamui on one side, rolling wall of artillery on the other, and the Japanese fleet boxing everything in stretched to the horizon, even for those in the thick of it.

~ *[Those carriers in the center, that's where the enemy kamui are! Let's try and hit them all at once!]* ~ Nekketsu said using her synthesized voice through the earpiece.

~ *[Agreed! We can overwhelm them and win the battle right here, right now!]* ~ Furashada added.

But Seijitsu groaned, ~ *[Aw, but Satsuki said **we'd** get to duel them!]* ~

~ *[Oh, that's what you always want!]* ~

~ *[Sorry love,]* ~ Tekketsu agreed with Furashada, ~ *[Today we don't have time for fun!]* ~

“Speaking of, look at that!” Ira called out. A loud hiss emanated from one of the largest aircraft carriers as a huge, conical machine in its center vented a twinkling red cloud of life-fibers. “Looks like they did have a backup shield generator.”

“Not good! If it goes up, our fleet will be cut off and it'll be just us alone. That'd be tough but...” Uzu said. He was thinking *“But we could probably take them,”* but even if that probably was true better not to find out.

~ *“I'll handle this one!”* ~ Tsumugu shouted as he plunged down from high in the sky, directly towards the carrier. The cloud of life-fibers was taking shape now into the conical central stalk and mushrooming outer dome, but it crept slowly and Tsumugu sped right past it on steel wings powered by screaming jet engines. Now Reiketsu took in the spread of ships below and cannons and missile launchers erupted from along the wings from new seams that clunked open as one. She sprayed a barrage that blanketed the shield-carrier's escort, and Tsumugu blasted right through the meagre flak curtain they managed to throw at him.

The carrier's deck buckled and ripped to splinters when Tsumugu landed. The slowly growing shield immediately sputtered and died. With a huge groan and a chain of internal explosions the ship began to slowly sink. There weren't many who survived – those who did wore Ultima Uniforms and were either three-stars who could weather the blasts or wore weaker models that could fly and wisely leapt off to regroup.

~ *[Be taking some of these, if you don't mind!]* ~ Reiketsu's lashing black tendrils swept out, grabbing cannons and aircraft and dragging them towards Tsumugu. The three-stars left standing amidst the wreckage were regrouping, shouting that if they attacked together they could take him. But that got a lot harder when they were swept aside by a collapsing avalanche of dented artillery pieces and ammunition belts.

“Good one, Reiketsu!” Tsumugu yelled. All those artillery pieces converged on him and abruptly folded into the nowhere-space inside Reiketsu, then erupted back out like a steel peacock tail and immediately began firing at the nearby ships. “On this battlefield, the greatest tactical advantage is to be able to attack at any range, in any direction, at any time!” He then turned to face the surviving REVOCS cultists, “But I doubt I’ll need that against this rabble.”

The rest of the kamui corps watched this happen as they closed in on the fleet. Having flown many miles across open water, they were finally weaving between the first rows of ships. And that meant things were about to become very busy as swarms of cultists wearing flying Ultima Uniforms – with short, wide wings bearing glowing red rotors like big angry eyes – sprung up from their ships and converged upon them.

*[Our turn now!]* Tekketsu declared.

“Stand back everyone! We’ll clear the way! **TEKKETSU! KYOJIN FORM!**” Ira shouted to the others, and they split, weaving off into the bustling sky. Everywhere they went, sheer speed carried the day against the feeble One-Stars – they could cut down dozens before they could even react.

But Ira was aim for more than dozens. The steam that vented from seams in Tekketsu’s plating turned into gouts of fire and then pouring streams of molten, liquid metal. It spun through the air of its own accord, knitting a spherical cage around him. It started as a lattice, but the metal swiftly oozed out to fill it in, creating a molten orb that dropped into the water. The sea immediately began to boil around it. Amidst the foam it sat there, vibrating rhythmically like a massive heart, immune to all bullets and blades. And then, with a huge noise like an engine revving up, it began to expand in a fountain of liquid stone and fire and boiling water.

“**YAAAAAH!**” Ira’s impossibly loud voice roared as from the steam a pair of huge hands of polished stone – immaculately sculpted even down to the fingertips – slammed down on the battleships on either side. “**LET’S SEE YOU GET PAST THIS!**” The massive shoulders of this colossal living sculpture of Ira Gamagoori rose up as he stretched and set his feet upon the seabed below. Blazing eyes – Ira’s and Tekketsu’s together – surveyed the fleet, ignoring the tiny REVOCS soldiers hacking uselessly at him and the artillery pounding that could only knock insignificant dust from his stone musculature.

On shore, Ryuko grinned, “Hell yes. I’ve never seen them use this form before. He must feel like a fuckin’ god.”

“Yeah... whoa,” Mako agreed, mouth hanging open in awe.

Ryuko smirk and bopped her on the shoulder, “What’s this now, new kink discovered?”

Mako was indignant, but cheerily so, “Wha- shut up! This isn’t the time for teasing me! And even if it was true, can you blame me? And look at his hair! It’s made of solid gold!”

“Clear the comms channel, you too,” Satsuki chided them – amusing or not this was no time for messing around. “He can’t even hear you anyway.”

“No?” Mako asked.

“Well yeah, it’s not like his earpiece turned giant too,” Ryuko nodded. “But what’s the harm anyway?” She asked Satsuki, “Everything seems to be going well, right? I mean look at him!” Ira threw the ships he’d grabbed, smashing them into several others in a cluster of fiery explosions.

Every move he made caused a burst of bright flashes as Ultima Uniforms were dashed aside and broken against his stony skin. More kept coming – now some distant ships were unloading lanky, hunchbacked mecha that waded through the sea to take him on. But comparatively Ira was faster, more agile, and still taller and stronger than them. He quickly set upon the nearest one, bashing its head in with a fist.

“It is, don’t worry,” Satsuki said, leaning on Ryuko to show her the battle’s progression on her tablet. “But you know we’ve all got to stay vigilant for it to stay that way. That’s why I’m here at all, I could have just as easily commanded everything using this touch screen from miles away. That’s how most generals do it these days. But then it’s hard to tell what the state of things really is. See here, this is the front line of the enemy fleet,” She pointed to a row of little red dots on the screen. “Iowa-class, American made. Old, but they have hard armor and excellent firepower. Our front line is within their range, but our ships have longer range guns – just fewer. So we should back up, no?”

Ryuko looked out at the actual fight. It wasn’t hard to tell what Satsuki was getting at. “Hell no, they’re in total freakout mode about Ira suddenly going titan mode right in between them. Seems like they can’t decide if they should shoot at our ships or him, so they’re firing everywhere randomly and missing a ton of shots” Ryuko said, and Satsuki nodded approvingly. “And if we backed off,” Ryuko went on, growing more confident, “then this kind of semi-circle around them our ships make would be wide enough their second line could creep through. So we’d be outnumbered!”

“Very good,” Satsuki grinned approvingly and kissed Ryuko on the head as a little reward. “You catch on quick. You know, people often liken commanding a battle to a chess game. The ships are my pawns, the kamui my knights, rooks, what have you.”

“And I’m the queen!”

Satsuki hummed, “Hmmhmm, no in the chess metaphor you’re the king, at least for today. But it doesn’t matter anyway because I don’t agree. How degrading for all those hardworking sailors! I see it as an evolution of an old medieval siege. The ships are the castle walls, the garrison the men and guns on board. They control the terrain of the battlefield, only now I can move them. Same principle but higher tech. And the kamui, well they’re my cavalry, they’re meant to sally out and seize victory, once I have manipulated the terrain to my advantage. And each has a specialized purpose: Ira has crowd clearing, Rei hybrid beast slaying, Aikuro long range precision, and Tsumugu air superiority.”

“Mhm!” Ryuko made a noise of thoughtful comprehension.

“And of course, Uzu is our ‘counter-cavalry’. He neutralizes the enemy cavalry. In fact, I think he’s coming up on them right now,” They could hear the chatter as the rest of the kamui corps blew past Ira, linked up with Tsumugu, and dove towards a pair of massive flagships in the center of the fleet. Apparently that was where the Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu were held in their life-support pods, and now they were unsealing. “You know, it all reminds me of the story of Kamikaze, the divine wind. Have you heard of it?” Ryuko and Mako both shrugged, “Goodness, what was Aikuro teaching you two in history class. It was a huge typhoon that struck our islands in the medieval ages, when the Mongolian empire was attempting to invade. Legend has it that the storm shattered their fleets, saving the Japanese from conquest.”

“Oh yeah, I guess I have heard that one,” Ryuko said. “And I can see why you’re reminded of it. If the shoe fits, I guess.”

*[Mako, they aren’t talking about our weather changing abilities, are they?]* Tonbo asked. The thought had occurred to Mako too. If they could summon a storm, would that be helpful? Would it sweep the enemy away? *[Tell them that I don’t know how to control it, it’s just something that happens when we transform sometimes.]*

“Huh? Oh, Tonbo, no don’t sweat it,” Ryuko overheard that telepathic remark and gave Mako a reassuring pat “We weren’t trying to like, nudge you to get involved or anything.”

“No, not at all,” Satsuki agreed, “It’s merely that there’s a parallel with that story in our current situation, you see.”

Mako smiled in relief, “I get it. It’s kind of like, the storm didn’t come this time, so we have to do it ourselves.”

“Close, but that ain’t quite what Sats meant,” Ryuko said, “She’s sayin’ *we are* the storm this time.”

## Divine Wind: 2

October 2068

~~~~~

Uzu slammed down onto the deck of a REVOCS flagship, flanked on either side by Rei and Aikuro. They dispatched the remaining crew and soldiers that had survived bombardment from air, sea, and land swiftly – and as humanely as possible. Above them, Tsumugu was circling. He still launched a few missiles at fighter jets that got too close, but like them his focus was on a pair of aircraft carriers dead ahead. They stood out from the rest of the fleet not only because each held one of the enemy kamui in suspended animation, but also because aside from that they were basically abandoned. And basically derelict too, just a couple rusty hulks lurching forward slowly under clouds of sputtering, inky smoke. It was all their ancient engines could do to keep them afloat.

*[Looks like they don't want anything of value to be lost to our battle,]* Seijitsu observed. *[Let's disappoint them!]* Uzu dexterously popped his katana into two – perfect halves right along the blade's edge, and then held up a hand for the others to hold position.

Steam escaped from the suspended animation pods as their seams came unsealed. Slowly they creaked open. “Shouldn't we go for them before they power up?” Rei asked.

“Always so practical,” Uzu shook his head, “We'll do the honorable thing, not that they care. Besides, I got this weird feeling like we should go in careful.”

“Your Shingantsu?”

“Yeah, just a vibe like they might have a trap for us. Ships wired to explode or something.” But the pods were no fakes, they could see the forms of kamuis Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu materializing amidst the steam, wrapped tightly around their hosts. On the left, Yuriketsu – velvety red skirts, voluminous and embroidered with dapples of black and gold like a Victorian lady's gown, and on the right Sumiretsu – loose and flowing silks of lilac, silver belts and tassels completing a neo-classical stola that might have been carved from marble to adorn the pale shoulders of Aphrodite.

They looked out of place, dainty and frail, against the rusted metal below. But no sooner had they emerged than did the kamui erupt from the twin bodies of their hosts. The red-haired heads of the two young ladies rocked back, caught in the raptures of their alien parasites, as the great flaming shadows loomed above them and engulfed them. They contracted down, fusing with the flesh once again into the more warlike shapes of their combat forms -

The moment the twin infernos died down Uzu, Rei and Aikuro attacked at once. They flung themselves towards the ship on the left, at Yuriketsu, crossing the wide expanse of water in a single leap. Tsumugu wheeled around and dive bombed the same ship, spewing rockets from ports along his wings and angling his sword-tip like a lance. Shockwaves of forces blasted the ocean into a hemispherical crater around the ship as they converged, each prepared with a lethal strike from a different angle.

Yuriketsu was quick to respond. It charged towards Rei first, the wide and platy red facets of its shoulderplates glinting like huge rubies. From the tightly bunched cleavage of its golden corset, it drew a hardened life-fiber greatsword of medieval style that unfolded to full size just in time to clash with Rei's axe. The sheer force of these two improbably large weapons, held only by the irrepressible superstrength of their diminutive wielders, ripped the rusted deck to shreds creating a jagged, ruined landscape. And Sumiretsu surged forth from her ship, a little silver arrow tipped by two long stiletto knives. Uzu, tapping his feet lightly onto the crumbling aircraft carrier, turned at once to intercept this new target and blocked each knife with one of his twin katanas. *[Go for the kill!]* Seijitsu shouted, and seizing on the opportunity Aikuro and Tsumugu as one dashed into the center of the combat, back to back. Aikuro swung the bladed tip of his bow – without its string a sort of two-sided halberd – at the back of Yuriketsu's neck, Tsumugu plunged his swordtip towards Sumiretsu's slender shoulders. Even the moment they swung, Uzu's instincts told him it wasn't going to be that easy.

They just weren't fast enough. Sumiretsu blocked with one knife, dancing backwards as Uzu powered through with a flurry of blows – that didn't catch either him or Tsumugu off balance, but she did pirouette gracefully to face both of them from the same angle. And Yuriketsu shoved off Rei with a terrible booming shockwave of force and lifted her sword aloft. She pivoted around and brought it down on Aikuro, who let it glance off his bow and penetrate the rusted deck. For a split second it seemed like it was stuck, and Aikuro took the opportunity to level a thrust at her. Near instantly the titanic strength inside Yuriketsu wrenched it free, metal screeching on metal. Two more wide swings would've maybe caught Aikuro's chin if he didn't rock back so the greatsword sliced over his head like a limbo bar.

Now the battle was on, a furious tornado as six kamui dashed back and forth across the ship with the full extent of their power and speed. The overhanging edges of the deck and the height of the control tower were shredded into flying rubble by the sheer force of blows faster than the human eye could see. The REVOCS kamui were, as ever, stronger than their adversaries and frequently pushed them back to the edges of the battleground or even forced them to take to the air for a few milliseconds of respite. Except Uzu, that was. Adrenaline, fear, even the thrill of combat were all secondary to the cool focus, the instinctive precision with which he saw and felt every move from both enemy and allies, instantly knew where to position himself to slide past the greatsword and daggers with nothing but tiny fractions of an inch to spare. At every instant his swords swung in huge, destructive arcs – so fast that only the reflective blur of the evening light would've been visible to an ordinary obersever. Try as they might, the REVOCS kamui couldn't pursue the others into the sky. If they did, if they turned their backs on him for even a second, he was right behind them and they had to turn to block or else he'd kill them. So they couldn't run, and they couldn't get through his defenses either. They were in his strike zone, and so they were trapped.

Exactly how he wanted. "I got this! Go!" He called, and as one the others peeled out, spreading across the fleet to join Ira's destructive rampage. Seijitsu – if she had a mouth – would have grinned as wide as Uzu did now. This was their time to shine. Still locked in lightning fast combat, he shouted to the REVOCS kamui, "So, long time no see girls! Got some new moves for me?"

"Polluted one!" Yuriketsu shot back in the high-pitched voice of its host, "You'll wish you had run with the others!"

"Tch. You'll have to do better than that! No amount of bluster'll hide the *obvious* fact that you're back's against the wall!"

“Maybe, but so’s yours! You just haven’t realized it yet!”

Uzu didn’t miss a beat. But he was ready for any surprise they might pull. “Oh yeah? Then why don’t you show me!”

With a grin, the twin kamui came to a halt together, snapping their backs rigid instantly. Facing Uzu, they clasp their hands together. He stopped too, holding a combat stance, breathing easy as though this had all been a morning jog. Between their clasped palms, a light began to form. Fire, golden and white, licking out and soon enshrouding their bodies. The sky behind seemed to grow unnaturally dark, shadows lengthened across the deck. It was as if the kamui were sucking all the light around into themselves

“Oh, I *see*!” Uzu had seen this before. In the last moments of Nonon’s battle with Rosuketsu, that kamui had tried something similar. A last-ditch effort. Seijitsu could feel the rising power, ascending peaks that might even have rivalled Ryuko, and Uzu could feel it too. It was like a huge magnet, a steady, constant wind with the force of a hurricane was repelling him away. He weighed for a moment whether to brace against it, but when their hands opened and a radiant brilliance like a newborn sun exploded out from within he was already leaping away.

### ***“COSMIC EMPOWERMENT!”***

The ship was consumed in a ball of molten fire, raining hot plasma in every direction. Like the sun itself, it lashed out indiscriminately with tendrils that ripped through everything they touched. Friendly ships, squadrons of fighter jets, nothing safe and the merest touch turned metal and flesh alike to ash.

The ball of light was visible from all the way back on shore. Mako and Satsuki both gasped at the sight and strained to listen to the comms. ~ “*Uzu! Uzu are you there!*” ~ Rei shouted, but a response didn’t come.

Ryuko stared out intently. “Is this the bad thing I’ve felt coming?” She muttered to herself, “No, no I think I could still fight them and win.” Then – as though to Nozomi, “Not that I’m gonna, don’t worry.”

Satsuki noticed that she looked less than alarmed. “Uzu, he’s alive?”

“I think I can still feel him, but he better know what he’s doing. I get this feelin’ like those two are planning to burn themselves up to take him with them.”

The orb of solar plasma contracted rapidly, collapsing back in upon itself until it vanished once again into the twin’s hands. Their bodies remained wreathed in fire, backdropped against an inky darkness that hovered around them in their air. Dozens of battleships nearby were broken, creating a maze of smoldering ruins upon the surface of the water. Ira, who wasn’t on the communication network while in his titan form, surged through, casting about for any sign of Uzu. He roared in fury and swatted swarms of tiny flyers from the sky. But of the aircraft carrier he could see nothing but the very front of the bow, a tiny triangle of charred metal slowly sinking beneath the boiling waves.

**“As I said,”** Yuriketsu said with a voice that resounded and echoed, **“You had no hope of resisting against our Empowerment.”**

**“The strength of a kamui is the expression of will. The human will, their instinct to survive comes alive in the kamui they wear. When your mistress Ryuko empowers you, she grants you a piece of the instinct to hunt and conquer which is her will. But that is a small, fleeting thing. The will of the life-fibers spans the cosmos, it is the sole power of this universe. Did you really think you had the will to stand against that?”** Sumiretsu continued, haughtily surveying the scene of destruction.

**“It is unfortunate that channeling the full extend of this power will quickly consume the life of our wearers,”** Yuriketsu held her hand before her eyes – the skin, already soft and pink, had gone white and pallid. **“The flesh is frail, but humans with such a high level of compatibility are hard to find. But no matter. Once the rest of these human-polluted kamui are destroyed, there will be all the time in the universe to find more.”**

“Oh, I think you’ve got less time than that!”

The eyes of the kamui went wide with shock. On that tiny, slowly sinking piece of the bow, there was something there! A tiny black object, a cocoon, made of wrapped fabric in a shape like a double teardrop – round in the middle, pointed on the top and bottom ends.

**“You – you survived!”**

*[Guess the ‘will of the cosmos’ isn’t that powerful after all!]* Seijitsu crowed triumphantly. She unfurled her cape, and as the cocoon pulled back it revealed Uzu. He was panting heavily, his arms were shaking, but not a hair on his head was singed. The cape itself though looked badly damaged, the surface was frayed and dingy and electricity sparked from little rips. But it had survived a blast of hot plasma, so far from being upset Seijitsu glowed with relief and pride. *[Still, that fucking hurt! And here I thought we were just playing around like we usually do, but fine! This time it’s for keeps!]*

Yuriketsu sneered, **“Yet you remain on your last legs. Now perish.”** It lifted a hand, and a light began to form in the center of the palm. It swelled into an orb of light that rocketed out, self-propelled and growing in size as it sizzled the air before it. But Uzu with the last of his strength leapt up, right into his salvation.

Ira was drawing close now, and the flocks of cultists with flying Ultima uniforms were scattered around him, peppering him with shots, trying to hit the seams in his titan form’s body and maybe slow his advance. A few had drawn to close to Uzu and the twin’s battle, and the moment they did was the very moment Uzu leapt up and skewered a hapless low-flying trooper on his sword. His Ultima uniform burst out along with his blood and Seijitsu eagerly drank it in. With a single flap of her cape-turned-wings, they were propelled to the next, dispatched just as easily, and then another. The twin kamui weren’t slow to react, they rushed forwards to cut him down. But with each uniform Seijitsu absorbed his speed increased, until the whole flock of forty or so men had been slaughtered in midair and he landed in a roll on the deck of another nearby ship, this one punched through with huge holes left by the flares of plasma.

*[See! Good as new,]* Seijitsu boasted. Uzu stood, his cape wrapping around his shoulders like a cloak.

“You should’ve come by yourselves, all of this,” Uzu held pointed his sword out at the battle, “Is just one big buffet for the kamui! You must’ve forgotten that my Seijitsu gets her strength back the moment she absorbs some fresh life-fibers. Too bad *you* can’t do the same,” He smirked.



*[And now that I've seen what you can do, I know what I need to do to beat you!]* Uzu flung his cape aside to reveal that below it, Seijitsu was not as she had been before. Those large pauldrons, with their curved spines that held her eyes had shrunk down, become streamlined plates like fish scales. And the loin-cloth style short skirts around Uzu's waist now clung to his thighs – it was a far sleeker, more streamlined form than her native state. But the wide eyes on Uzu's shoulders were closed now. Instead, a visor had fallen over the top half of his face, a rounded, smooth plate from the horns erupting from his scalp down to his nose. And on its deep green surface, Seijitsu's eyes had come together into a single cyclopean portal of fire, staring at the twin REVOCS kamui with triumphant fury.

“Kamui Seijitsu! Eye of the Needle!” Uzu shouted.

“**So you can change your form, so what?**” Yuriketsu huffed, “**Our raw power alone ensures your death!**” A shockwave blasted across the deck and before even a millisecond had passed, Yuriketsu was in front of Uzu, dropping her greatsword down onto his head. But that huge eye didn't flinch, and just as quickly Uzu's sword rose to meet it. It wasn't a great thundering collision, he just deftly let the two slide off each other, and Yuriketsu stumbled before jumping back in alarm. “**Y-you can't! With Cosmic Empowerment – how did you even see that blow!**”

*[I've boosted my speed, can't you tell?]* Seijitsu giggled, and the battle continued – only now an order of magnitude faster. Before each lunge came with the speed of a jet engine, now they moved at velocities typically achieved only by satellites in orbit. The ship rocked with each powerful stride from the REVOCS kamui, but Uzu flitted along light and nimble. *[No tricks, I just sacrificed a bit of raw strength to catch up with your speed, and why not? Your bodies are just human, Uzu can put his sword through your hearts just fine with just the power of his muscles!]*

They parted momentarily, and Uzu said with a grin, “You know, I gotta say I should be intimidated by this, I don't know how much of the life-fiber network's power you can really pump into yourselves. But this is *great!* You've given me a real challenge today.” With a flourish, he brought his two separated katana back together, clicking them together into a single huge blade. Two swords were good for holding off two opponents, but one? It became an extension of himself. “But please,” He said with menace, “Cut the monologues about the ‘will of the universe’ or whatever. This is a fight. The only things that are real are you, and us, your swords and mine! If my will is enough to keep my hands on the hilt, then it is enough to win against your entire universe!”

~~~~~

On the sea-wall, Ryuko watched how Uzu, Yuriketsu, and Sumiretsu fought, backdropped against the void of darkness. The blasts of light they fired, scattered randomly out into the night sky to splash steaming into the ocean, looked like shooting stars. But Uzu was still alive, he was still fighting – and on equal footing.

She nodded with satisfaction and said to Satsuki, “He's got this. Make sure everyone gives them some space though, wouldn't want a ship to catch a stray shot.”

“Good idea,” Satsuki quickly inputted that order into her tablet. The two of them had been watching things very closely. The plan was to enclose the enemy fleet with ships and wreckage and walls of constant artillery bombardment, and then allow the kamui corps to ravage them. And it was going as Satsuki had envisioned. Mostly. Despite everything the REVOCS battleships were still powerful, the legacy of the old American armies that had triumphed at great

expense in the world wars and against internal dissenters more recently. When they regained a bit of coherency, the broadsides they unleashed did punch a few holes, openings for breakouts. Ships forded through, and rear lines which could have been keeping up the bombardment were forced to pause and destroy them.

And the boarding parties that leapt from REVOCS ships by the power of their Ultima uniforms were formidable. The garrisons were all hardened marines, with anti-life-fiber needle rifles and nimble DTRs, but they were at a disadvantage in the close quarters of a ship. Zealot cultists with their shiny shaved heads and blank eyes surged like tides onto the deck, firing machineguns whose recoil would have blown their arms off if not for their boosted strength. They invaded amongst the marines, whose body armor provided little defense against such high caliber bullets. But just the same the needle rifles were not the humane needle guns of Nudist beach, each needle had lethal power behind it and could shred through what defenses an ultima uniform's energy field could provide. Their confrontations were fast and blood and whenever a higher ranking two or three-star commander joined their troops the mortal humans didn't stand a chance.

Between the broadsides and boarding parties, there were losses. Satsuki did everything she could to keep them as low as possible, and she explained everything she was doing to Ryuko as she did. Battle lines she pulled back out of dangerous range, boarded ships she marked for the kamui to land and help their garrison. The scale, with hundreds of ships in battle and still more in reserve at any moment, in addition to land artillery and planes, meant there was always something to do, some tweak only she with her sight of the whole picture could make. Sure, some ships were destroyed, many lives were lost, but she could make peace with that, and Ryuko tried to do the same. They heard on the comms that the men's morale was yet unbroken, that the terror of those who encountered the boarders was overwhelmed by the relief of those who had just barely evaded massacre. Overall, not a bad performance.

Ryuko was learning quickly too. It was mostly common sense, was what she was realizing. She'd always been good at judging quickly - if someone was all talk or genuinely brave, if a shot was going to hit its target, if someone would give when you hit them or if it would be your hand ringing in pain. Everything it took to win a fight. Call it instinct or the product of her childhood, she hadn't expected it to carry over to such a large scale. And when her common sense wasn't quite right, Satsuki was happy to dotingly and passionately explain all the minute details. It was a favorite specialty of hers, after all.

*And I'm beginning to see why,* Ryuko thought as she reminisced on it, *I hadn't expected this to be so fun! Well, not as fun as fighting myself, but still.* Press a button, and with a blast of foghorns a row of destroyers would turn as one, say the word and their torpedos would rip the formidable grey profile of a battleship into smithereens. It gave her chills.

The night wore on. Vast floodlights along the seawall beamed out into the ocean, Satsuki's imperious challenge to the invaders. *"Here we are, come and get us!"*

"Ooh, tricky!" Ryuko remarked as REVOCS attempted another breakthrough. This one was on the western flank, in an area that had already seen some of the worst of the fighting after Ira stomped through and sent the battle line into disarray. Now, a wedge formation of ships charged towards a gap in the Japanese line. The first few ships were already lurching, flaming, and near destruction, and between them the others raced through. They made a makeshift sort of cover, both from their own mostly abandoned shells and the smoke rising from them which obscured the aim of other ships. "You're telling them not to waste shots on the outer ships, right?"

“I am,” Satsuki nodded, “But even the heat seaking missiles are thrown off by all the smoke and fire. I’m moving reserves in to stop them when they get past the burning wrecks but until then...”

They watched as the first battleship’s gigantic metal prow cruised smoothly through the smoke and into clear water. It looked ominous, and sure enough the moment it was free it disgorged a flock of flying cultists and a broadside of artillery. It caught a *Naked Gun* – Class light destroyer, a much smaller ship, right in the center of its volley and the deck rumbled and was flung into the waves. “Fuuuck,” Ryuko groaned as she watched.

“I’m having a bomber wing shut that breakthrough down immediately,” Satsuki said. Watching that battleship be likewise destroyed by a swarm of tiny black planes was small consolation. “Mako, are you alright?”

Mako had gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth when she saw the Japanese ship explode. Now she smiled and chuckled uncertainly and said, “I’m fine! That ship just kinda looked like the *Naked Sol* is all, so it’s just a bit crazy to see it go down is all.”

“You know, we can go back into the city if you want. We don’t have to watch this,” Ryuko said. *Ah, poor Mako. I got so caught up in strategy I just let you sit there and watch the carnage unfold.*

“Nah, it’s alright,” Mako said, “Mostly I’m just watching Ira, ‘s kinda too far away to see much else.”

*[Ryuko, what happens to the sailors who fell into the water then?]* Tonbo asked softly.

Ryuko hesitated for a moment, the answer could only upset him. *But I’m talking to Mako as much as to him,* she reminded herself, *I know I wouldn’t say this to you* – She addressed this to Nozomi – *But I won’t keep an ugly truth from Mako.* “They’ll drown, probably. If the hybrid beasts don’t get them.”

“Hmm?” Satsuki asked.

“Tonbo just wanted to know whether the people who fall into ocean will live,” Mako explained for the sake of Satsuki’s ears, deaf to telepathy.

“Oh,” She, like Ryuko, hesitated. No way to sugar-coat this. “We will send out rescue boats after the battle has ended, but it’s too dangerous for that now. Boats would be blow apart or eaten by the hybrids just the same. I expect some will be lucky enough to cling to something floating, but not many. The best thing we can do for them is win, and swiftly.”

“Right,” Ryuko agreed.

“But they knew the risks.”

Mako nodded, understanding, but Tonbo said to her, *[But that’s horrible, isn’t it? They still have a chance, we can’t give up on them!]*

“I... guess I didn’t think about it,” Mako said softly. A shiver ran through her shoulders, and she didn’t hesitate a moment before loudly declaring, “I’m going to go rescue them!”

Ryuko and Satsuki looked up as one. “You serious? Mako I ain’t saying it’s not the right thing to do but... you’ve only got two hands.”

“I know that, but –“ Mako floated into the air, balling up her hands in determined little fists. “I have to. We have to try!”

Satsuki nodded, “Then we won’t stop you. But be careful. You will be attacked.”

“I know! I’ve got this,” She produced her bat from Tonbo’s pocket, and it telescoped out to full size. “If anyone tries to chase after me I’ll give ‘em a good smack!”

“Then good luck,” Satsuki said, and they watch as Mako sped off, fizzing like a bottlerocket into the distance. She asked Ryuko, “Do you think we should’ve stopped them?”

“Nah, they can take care of themselves. ‘Sides, would they have listened?”

“No, it’s not that I’m worried about.”

“Oh,” Ryuko said, “I see. But we couldn’t keep them from seeing what it’s really like forever, her or Tonbo.”

“I suppose. I just hope they don’t blame themselves.”

~~~~~

The sky was getting dark. Sure, it had been night already, but the clear night sky with plentiful moonlight was slowly giving way to thick clouds. The loose entrails of the life-fiber shield had drifted up to join them, streaking the sky red in places. *[With the floodlights, it almost looks like the battles happening inside. In some giant hall.]*

“Mhm,” Mako murmured, not really listening. She was trying to steel herself, because like it or not she knew she was going to see carnage up ahead.

*[...It’s been a while since you’ve been in a real fight,]* Tonbo read her thoughts.

“And last time I had Ryuko too. Kinda different when you rely on her to bail ya out,” Mako said as they slalomed between the back rows of friendly battleships. “Gosh, these things are bigger in person. Can you see where we were supposed to go?”

Both Mako and Tonbo had done their best to fix the position of that exploded ship, but now that they were entering the battle itself it was so much harder to see. *[Let’s fly up, get a look around,]* He said, and as they zoomed up Mako took in the whole panorama of the battle with wide eyes.

It was pure, utter chaos.

Describing the individual aspects of the battle, its individual theatres of action, would do its confusion and all-encompassing scale a disservice. But even from this height, Mako had to scan, picking individual things to focus on or else she couldn’t comprehend it. Everywhere she looked there was something going on. She could see the battle lines, spread apart by a barren track a couple mile across – Mako’s life experience told her it was about forty city blocks wide, maybe three times her old daily commute to Honnouji. Considering the huge scale of the ships this no-man’s land was fairly thin, and the cannons of the front lines lobbed shots at an almost horizontal angle across, one continuous sheet of fire and smoke. Below, the water – ink black and speckled with pinpricks of reflective light - was choked with the dead wreckage of ships and kicked into a

frenzy. She could see the black fins and rolling backs of the hybrid beasts below. The ships below her hummed with activity, some washed over with the purple glow of ultima uniforms, others with fires and wreckage, but most with the urgent, teeming activity of the sailors and marines. Each one had a miniature drama occurring onboard, and around its flanks was itself beset by the teeth of the monsters. Even the sky wasn't safe, it swarmed with innumerable fighters like shoals of fish, Mako didn't even bother trying to keep track of them, they all seemed to have their own goals. And across the no-man's-land, in the center of the fleet...

The realm of the kamui. So close to it, witnessing the unyielding strength that they usually kept in check, even Tonbo felt as though they had become strange to him. She could hear him chuckle, a low noise of sheer, exultant awe at the sight of what they could do, what *he* could do. She could see that the intact part of the REVOCS fleet made a sort of ring, though its inside edge was rough and disordered. They tried to give the center a wide berth, but occasionally part of that maelstrom would reach out, expanding, and grab a new ship to consume. The luminescence of the guns, the occasional troop of Ultima cultists, and the fires in the mortal battleground below her paled in comparison. Hordes of cultists – god, there must have been *thousands* – flew and leapt like locusts each carrying their own unearthly lantern of purple or blue or red or golden yellow. Fording through them like comets, with trails of explosions and plasma lighting their way behind them, there were the kamui. Aikuro, Tsumugu, and Rei – blue, red, and violet stars. They were far too distant for Mako to see their bodies, but she could see how they darted back and forth. Everywhere they went, the twinkling multitudes of the REVOCS cultists went dark before them, Mako saw how they broke through where the crowds were thin only to double around and dive back in, zig-zagging between opponents so that their afterimages coalesced into a web of light. Still, the hordes continued to collapse on them as if pulled by gravity, and so they were forced each in turn to rotate gradually around the central hub where Uzu fought the REVOCS kamui to avoid getting overwhelmed.

Ira alone among them did not orbit the central battle. His titan form was the epicenter of its own battlefield, and it could only be described as... “Unreal...” Mako murmured in awe.

*[Is that really them?]* Tonbo blinked. From the shore, at ground level, it hadn't been possible to take in the scale, the height and weight of the living stone titan. Waves barely rose past his knees, and with every step the sea shuddered, foaming up into crashing breakers that on their own could submerge and capsize smaller ships like destroyers and cruisers. From above, Mako felt dizzy watching such huge volumes of water move, “It's like he's in a kiddie pool!”

His head was haloed by a constant barrage of explosions – it must have been blinding – but he clearly relied on Tekketsu's aura sense more than his eyes because in spite of that he deftly targeted each ship or for destruction. Planes and people were too small, like gnats, many were caught up in the meteoric descents of his fists but just as many kept alive, swarming around him in a furious multicolored tornado. At times Mako could only make out the glittering gold of his metallic “hair”, and she wasn't sure if she should be worried for him or not. It certainly didn't seem to affect him.

“And she's like... not even more powerful than you!” Mako was so shocked that for just a moment she forgot what she'd come out here to do. It was too surreal, dreamlike, her head was spinning.

*[Yeah. She's taken the power we all have, and made it visible to humans,]* Tonbo realized, *[The Kyojin form is a physical manifestation of her aura!]*

“And what about that... thing in the middle?” Mako asked. “What’s happening in the place where Uzu and those two kamui are fighting?” The nimbus of power around the REVOCS kamui was hard to look at, by far the most unearthly part of the entire scene. It was like a black hole, a reverse sun, inky darkness sucking rays of light inward to a core that seemed to bore right through. “It looks flat, doesn’t it? Like it’s a hole in a sheet of paper.” And across that hole the comets danced – Uzu and his adversaries, and the beams of molten plasma they shot. No ships were left above the water there, instead they flew in intricate patterns. Mako gulped as she watched them clash, dozens of times a second or maybe even more, and she knew that level of combat expertise was as beyond her as that black hole of raw power was for Tonbo.

*[That’s death. Let’s just stay away.]*

“Agreed! Then, where are we supposed to be going again?” Mako nodded, refocused on her mission.

They scanned the battle, and together spotted the twin lanes of burnt out REVOCS ships that had forded through the no-man’s land. The smoke rising from the wrecks mixed together and with the ever-darkening sky in impenetrable walls, and more REVOCS battleships emerged from within. The sheets of gunfire around them were even thicker. “There! There’s the *Naked Sol* lookalike!”

*[Then lets not waste any more time!]* They flipped and dove directly down, leveling out directly above the ocean. Flying so low, they hoped to avoid the notice of the enemy battleships by hiding their glow amid the sea foam. It worked, but Mako shuddered when she saw the oily black fins of hybrid sharks trailing after her in the water. She was much faster than them and was long gone before any of their toothy maws broke the surface in a vain attempt to drag her down. But she could see them right below her, rolling away under the surface, layer upon layer of their scaly, writhing shapes descending into the abyss. Not all of them moved to chase her, the bulk of them were patrolling the floating scraps, chomping the larger bits of metal into pieces, eat... something. *[Mako, best not to look at what they’re eating. I can’t feel any signs of human life here.]*

Mako was already having trouble keeping the bile from rising in her throat. She’d seen the unfortunate crewmen – what was left of them, anyway – bobbing on the surface of the water before Tonbo had a chance to warn her. “Too late!” She said weakly. The dreamlike scene became a nightmare as she realized just how many broken bodies, how many free floating arms and legs with pale flesh and blood-soaked clothing drifted between the scraps of shrapnel. She only had a moment to ponder how awful it was, that those used to be people, because suddenly she noticed that she wasn’t alone in the air.

There was a flock of objects – about the size and shape of footballs, but dull grey – creeping across the no-man’s land in front of her. Mako blinked, not quite sure what she was seeing. With a kick as though swimming, Mako easily threaded her way between them. “Bullets!” She exclaimed with wide eyes when she was among them, “I can even see the little warning labels!”

*[They’re all around us!]* Tonbo shouted, as behind them too the artillery shells were passing by in a cloud. Mako stopped to watch as the first of them slammed into a Japanese battleship, bursting into smoke and fire with loud explosions that shook the air. They left dents, but to Mako’s relief didn’t look like enough to sink the ship – she wasn’t ready to rescue an entire battleship full of people.

“I never realized they slowed down so much in the air!” Mako exclaimed as she casually drifted back and forth between them, some close enough that she could examine all the little seams and lines of printed text.

*[Mako,] Tonbo said, [You know it's not them that's slowed down, right?]*

“You mean – *holy* –,” Mako cut herself off as she realized that Tonbo was right, it wasn't that they were slow. “*Everything* is slow!” The waves and foam sloshing in suspended animation, the beasts below undulating and grinding against each other like scaly clockwork gears, the sinuous dance of the fires all around. “*We're* the ones sped up!”

Mako had never noticed it before. She'd never had a reason to. Tonbo had only used his full power when training or playing with the other kamui. She'd never had a frame of reference that wasn't moving a supersonic!

*[That's right,] Tonbo said.*

“So this is what it's like. This is what it's like for Ryuko all the time!” Mako said wonderingly. She reached out with her bat and experimentally tapped the very tip of a shell. She felt it give, a tiny click, and watched as – quickly, but still at a totally visible speed – the smooth metal shell buckled and cracked from within, and between them a brilliant orange flame bloomed and washed around her. “Yikes!” For a moment she was blinded, but it all passed as just a momentary flushed feeling on her skin, and she blinked to see the shell gone and herself totally unharmed. Her hands trembled from the excitement of it, her horror and fear were forgotten again.

“Whoa!” She curled her other hand into a fist. “I get it now! This is your real power!”

Tonbo too was in awe, the way the power surged through him was normal to him. The way it could move Mako's tiny body was normal, but the effect it could have on the world... *[Then, we really are invincible!]*

At that moment, one of the hybrid sharks that had been pursuing her caught up, lunging directly out of the water below, fifty feet of rippling black muscle. Its bloodshot eyes rolled back and its grimy, serrated teeth extended on pale, grisly, rumped jaws. It looked so slow, that deep void of its mouth so unthreatening. Mako gave it a light bop on the nose with her fist.

It was gone, carving a hole deep down into the water – Mako could see it for a moment before the foam collapsed and kicked up a tremendous spray. Something so big, dismissed right before her eyes like that. Like it wasn't even real. Tonbo was right, they were invincible! She couldn't help but grin, and quickly turned back to their goal. As she sped away she merrily shouted and shouted, “C'mon Tonbo! There's no time to waste! We really *can* save those sailors with your power, so let's throw caution to the wind and drag them out of this nightmare!”

## Divine Wind: 3

### Chapter Summary

Real life's busy and difficult sometimes, Elden Ring is really good, and I didn't have as much of a plan for this part as I thought I did. Oops. Here's some more.

I'm just gonna keep going with this sequence as long as it takes. The Mako scene here has a lot more potential than what I had first planned for it so I'm just gonna write it out til it's done.

Also yeah I'm gonna stick with using the ordinary soldier characters I came up with that one time to show an "outside" perspective on our crew. Better than coming up with new ones each time. Also I like the idea of having their paths crossing intermittently like this, I think if there were real superhuman demigod mega-celebrities in the real world people would definitely remember every time they got close to them.

October 2068

~~~~~

“So hold on, if everything is slowed down why does it still feel like I’m talking normally?”

*[That’s a good point, why **does** it feel that way? Because if you were talking sped up, nobody would be able to understand you. And you understand Ryuko just fine and this is how she lives her whole life, so,]*

“Right! And if I were talking normally, shouldn’t I hear it come out reeeeeaaaaallllyyyyy ssssslllloooooowwww?”

*[Yes, that is what I’d expect too. So the only explanation is that you can perceive your body’s motions at a pace that feels like normal to you and your speech at a pace that feels normal too. That almost makes me wonder if Shiro’s theory is right, and Kamui powers are somehow relativity-based.]*

“... Huh? That doesn’t make sense to me!”

*[W-well, uh, I mean that you are talking at a normal speed, but you’re so used to that you don’t even think about how it sounds, you just say it.]*

“Oh! You mean like how you’re used to hearing your voice out of your mouth, so when you hear it recorded and played back it sounds all weird?”

*[Pretty much, yeah.]*

“That’s genius! So what do I sound like to you when you power up then?”



*[The same as ever. I'm always operating at 'superhuman' speed I'm a kamui – oh shoot! Never mind that, we're here!]* Mako halted, instantly turning upright in midair. The momentum of her sudden stop threw her hair into her face and the tails of Tobo's jacket fluttered around her ankles. She stopped between two friendly battleships on the front line, and before her was the place where REVOCS had tried to break through. The Japanese fleet had bowed out into a wide arc to give them space, and now was launching a continuous spray of thundering cannons and screaming missiles into the sky-high wall of smoke before them. At its base, the foundering ruins of half-sunken REVOCS wrecks, immense piles of burning rubble, created what looked almost like a series of doorways. Between each there was an empty space about twice as wide as a ship, and on the other side Mako could see another row of wrecked ships. The smoke rising out met in between each ship at a great height to create the top of the “doorways”.

*[I see what Ryuko and Satsuki were saying, they've used their own wrecks to create a safe lane,]* Tonbo said as before their eyes more REVOCS battleships charged through the doorways, feeding out of their fleet already in attacking range. Hulking, angry steel prowls barged through the debris, and behind them flotillas of smaller ships fanned out, all shooting indiscriminately. The firefight was a constant battle of attrition, every REVOCS ship that exploded became another obstacle, but it also became another piece of cover, a new column of smoke to hide behind.

Amidst them, the remains of the Japanese ships that had been caught in the first breakthrough showed how far back the line of battle had been pushed. They were caught up and surrounded by their enemies – with their bright red war paint and slender, high-tech profiles it was obvious which was which. Right in the center, the biggest and most prominent of them, the *Naked Gun*-class ship that had caught their attention in the first place.

It was dwarfed by the American made floating fortresses around it, but actually a slightly expansion and improvement on the design of the *Naked Sol* that had gone up against Ragyo all on its own. More guns, more launch bays for boarding boats and aircraft, but the same razor thin, knifelike keel with the wide flat deck balanced atop it, the same control tower in the rear that Mako had once stood on, the same ring-shaped gyro engine huffing out bright blue exhaust. Only now the exhaust came out indiscriminately from random cracks and holes, and the deck had been peeled off, propped on its side against a keel rising at a forty-five-degree angle from where it was lodged in the seafloor.

Thunder rumbled overhead.

“Do you... think there's even anyone left alive?” Mako asked, and even though Tonbo didn't have an answer she tilted forward and headed right for it. The sailors on the nearby ships raised up a huge cheer that made Mako jump and Tonbo realize just how obviously visible they were.

*[They expect us to fight the enemy, don't they?]* Tonbo said.

“It's a battle, we might have to.”

They kept low, skimming alongside the hulls of ships and darting from one to the other in lightning quick flashes. Hopefully that would keep them off the REVOCS target list, and if not at least they couldn't shoot without hitting a friend. It seemed to work, in less than a minute they were hovering above the wrecked *Naked Gun*-class – named *Namiwokiru*, “*Wave Slicer*”. The water was thicker with shrapnel and debris here than anywhere else Mako had seen, almost a total coating over the water surface. The water sloshed roughly around the base of the ship, ten- and twenty-foot-tall

foaming breakers crashing into the solid surface of the deck. Mako's heart sunk as she pictured how easily a person could be smashed between the two.

"Ough, it reeks! This smoke!" She exclaimed between coughing fits. *I need to figure out how to find the people!* "My eyes! Tonbo hold on!" She dove down and circled the *Namiwokiru*, spinning quick enough to momentarily blast the smoke away.

*[Look Mako, there!]* Tonbo tilted and eye down. There, clinging to a wide, flat piece of metal siding, was a pale, limp, human shape.

"Aha! Our first save!" Mako shot down and wasted no time. The man was laying face down, all his strength concentrated in clutching his raft with bleeding, numb fingers. "Up here!" Mako floated down gently, holding her right hand out to him (she had put her bat back in her pocket to fly better earlier). He gasped, totally beyond words, as his face lifted and was illuminated by the glow Tonbo emitted.

"Grab on!" Mako insisted, and finally didn't wait for him to react any longer. He was right there, and in the intensity of the moment with the sea rocking and spraying his face Mako was sure it would slip over and claim him if she hesitated. So she just grabbed him, fingers tight around his wrist and rose, dragging him and his soaked uniform with her.

His soaked *Ultima* uniform.

"Huh? A-AAH!" In the same moment as Mako realized what was happening the shocked plainness of the man's face tore open into a triumphant, rage filled grin and he thrust a knife forward at her face with his free hand. It came at Mako slow, but she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Who cared if he was REVOCS, she was *saving* him! Her reflexes saved her, she whipped her free hand up in front of her face.

A splash of red and a shock of pain obscured her vision. She winced, and when she opened her eyes they were clotted with involuntary tears. Blearily, and with mounting horror she saw a blue-black knife, a combat bayonet, impaled deep in the flesh of her left forearm.

*[Hardened life-fibers!]*

"U-u-A-AAAAAAAGH!" Mako screamed, and at that very moment thunder clapped directly overhead and the sky was shot through by a bolt of lightning. She moved her other arm to clasp the wound without thinking, and the weight of the REVOCS cultist gave way. In her pain Mako had clenched so hard on his wrist that her full strength had turned it into a thin wadded pulp, smeared across her palm. She was holding his hand, and the rest of him tore loose and dropped howling into the water.

After that he was gone, sinking below the waves with only a small splash and no visible bubbles. Mako stared wide-eyed in horror at herself – the bloody hand and the knife through her arm. Her chest heaved in panic, "He – he stabbed me!"

*[Why? Why! We were trying to **help** him!]* Tonbo was at a complete loss. *[He was the enemy, but didn't he want to live?]*

"No Tonbo," Mako said breathlessly, "I think killing us mattered more to him than living." She dropped the hand and gingerly wrapped her bloody fingers around the hilt of the knife, but even the

slightest shift shot pain through her arm and she winced. “I can’t get it out! Geez, how could this happen!”

*[This might not be as easy as we thought Mako,]* Tonbo said.

“Yeah no kidding! Now we have that to watch out for too and – oh, wow, I’m bleeding a *lot*,” *Or is that his blood? Ahh, it’s all mixed up now!* The possibility of bleeding out – passing out mid fight the way Ryuko used to do – loomed in Mako’s mind.

*[No, look! They do want to fight!]* Tonbo was as panicked as she was. He saw the squads of flying REVOCS cultists lifting off from their ships, coming in from every direction. The glowing red rotors of their wings like pairs of eyes. Hungry, mindless beast eyes. Weak though they were those things were operated by hardened soldiers. They saw Mako as easy prey, an enemy VIP who had haplessly wandered into their path. Of course they would try to kill her until the last gasp. She had to be protected. *[Take the knife out! I’ll make you a bandage!]*

“I can’t! It’s too deep in there!”

*[You’ll be okay. Look, you can still move your fingers, you can still use your arm,]* Tonbo said soothingly.

Mako tried it, and was relieved to see that Tonbo was right, the knife only dangled from the soft flesh of the side of her arm. It hadn’t hit bone, it hadn’t hit anything vital. She could still wiggle her fingers, the pain didn’t extend up to her elbow or down to her hand.

“Okay, I *can* still move my fingers, it’s just a flesh wound. Ryuko and Mataro deal with this kind of thing every day, they all do. What would they do? What would Ryuko do?” The moment she asked, she had her answer. “She wouldn’t let them get her like that again. And then she’d beat the hell out of all of them!”

She squeezed the bayonet’s handle tight and with eyes squeezed shut wrenched it out as hard as she could. “A-Aagh!” Mako screamed in pain as it came free, and just as soon as it did the end of Tonbo’s wide, flowing sleeve contracted, closing tight around the wound in a thick armband dyed faintly red by the soaking blood. “I’m okay! It’s just pain, I can be tough like Ryuko.” Tonbo contracted even tighter, squeezing and extending himself into the gash until the pressure sealed the wound solid

*[Mako, I’m realizing something. This is more of your blood than I’ve ever taken in at once,]* Tonbo said. Even as he spoke, the world was spinning for him. It flooded through his fibers like a shot, warm and fuzzy and stinging. Along with it came a rush of exuberant vigor that raced out beyond the confines of his body, washing over Mako and out into the air around them. It crackled, bright against her skin, and everything seemed to slow down even further.

“Whoa... you weren’t kidding,” His power flooded through Mako too, washing away pain and doubt. “I feel like I’m floating! Well, I *am* floating, but you know what I mean,” She dropped down and planted her feet on the high edge of the *Namiwokiru*’s deck, then reached into Tonbo’s pocket and swapped the knife for her bat – it exploded to full size as she brandished it. “Think it’ll be enough?”

*[Yes I do! The difference in combat experience between us and them is huge, but so is the difference in power! They need cheap tricks like that to hit us, I’m sure of it.]*

“And we won’t fall for that again,” Mako said, her confidence restored. “I’ve never fought a real person before besides Ryuko that one time, but from this distance they kind of look like COVERS.”

*[But, we have to get closer,]* Tonbo said, and Mako rolled her eyes and smiled despite herself.  
*[Should we wait for them here?]*

“Nope!” Mako declared and shoved off from the ship at tremendous speed. She let her bat trail behind her, readying it for a huge, smashing swing. The distance between herself and the leading REVOCS cultists closed, and she watched for just the right moment with the determined intensity of someone who fully believed she needed every ounce of focus to win.

She went from standing on the deck to right in front of him before he could blink

“HUYYYA!” She shouted, swinging her bat with her entire body. It caught him right across the belly with a beautiful hollow *\*CRACK!\**, and Mako caught a glimpse of the shocked look on his face – puffed up and gurgling like a puffer fish – before he was sent spinning away, crashing into the sea with the same speed she had leapt at him. She immediately turned to the next target – who was still reeling from how abruptly she had appeared – and plucked him from combat with the same vigorous swing. And then onto the next, and the next, pulling right through the center of the swarm before they could react and tossing cultists away like confetti. *It’s like they aren’t even there!* Mako found herself thinking in a detached way. She could have been swinging her bat through thin air, the REVOCS cultists offered no resistance and parted like mist. Before she knew it she had cleared through to the other side of the swarm and was watching the rest of them turn towards her slowly. Slowly not just because their reactions were so slow compared to her, but because of the shocked hesitation she could plainly see on their faces.

*[Did – did you kill them?]* Tonbo asked.

“I tried not too,” Mako said, “It didn’t feel like I broke their bones, just sent them flying.”

*[Well would you know if you did?]* Tonbo asked – a rhetorical question, Mako shuddered at the thought but didn’t answer. Now Tonbo raised his voice, telepathically shouting at the wavering REVOCS cultists, *[Wait! We don’t have to keep fighting, if you back off, we won’t come after you!]*

The swarm began to close ranks, shouting together as they converged. When Mako was on the *Namiwokiru* they had fanned out into a wide ring, a donut like shape around her in the air. Now she had broken through, and the shape bent and contracted as the far side of the ring rushed back to help their comrades. However many there were, it was certainly in the thousands. But not a one showed any sign of hearing Tonbo’s plea. He tried again, *[Can’t you see we’re too strong for you? Don’t throw your lives away!]* He was horrified, there was no reaction, no change in the dull antipathy of the Ultima uniforms’ auras. *[They can’t hear me, can they?]* He realized.

Another rhetorical question. Mako forded in, bashing through them just as easily as the first time. She turned left into the ring and began working her way around, shouting “HIYA!” with every swing. Tonbo watched her back, he didn’t need to use words to tell her when someone behind was getting a little too close.

But he did keep trying to use words to warn them. *[Don’t,]* he would say to the few cultists who managed to get close to Mako, who had convinced themselves they were about to plunge a knife into the soft flesh of her back. Of course they never heard him, and they wouldn’t have listened anyway, and so they were dismissed with a single solid bash into the sea.

*[What is wrong with these Ultima things!]* He exclaimed, *[They're like mindless drones! I can't feel a shred of thought or emotion coming from them!]* It made both Tonbo and Mako shudder. She knew on an intuitive level that weaker life-fiber outfits like Goku and Ultima uniforms were just extensions of the gigantic presence that had been behind Junketsu and Ragyo and Nui and all the rest – the kamui were *people*, but other uniforms weren't. She'd never thought about how, through the eyes of a kamui, a goku uniform would look and feel like a person. But it just wasn't. Of course that was horrifying to him.

"They're like zombies!" Mako said when she had half a second free.

*[No, not quite. They're **slaves**! I think I can even feel their shackles, their connection to the network!]* The more of Mako's blood he drank, the sharper and more refined his aura sensing became. He could feel cords of heat running through the Ultima Uniforms, right down the backs of their wearers.

His attention focused right there on the nearest cultist, and Mako didn't need to be told what to do. She dashed behind him, eyes drawn by instinct directly to the right place. *[Careful now,]* Mako produced the bayonet that had stabbed her and moved in, *[Like carving a turkey.]*

To Mako it felt like she'd taken her time, but the cultists didn't have a chance to react. She hooked the tip of the bayonet into the fabric, lifting it from his skin, and then ever so gently sliced a tiny opening right where his neck met his back. The response was instant. The Ultima Uniform shattered, unwinding into its component life-fibers and flying away. Mako jerked back, the sudden elastic snap startled her. But it was far more than a little rubber-band snap to the cultist who was suddenly flying naked through the air, he gasp and jerked as though electrocuted and was immediately unconscious. After a moment of aimless drifting, all the loose life-fibers turned and bent around, magnetically drawn towards Tonbo. He absorbed them readily.

"Oh! Sen-i-soshitsu!" Mako gasped in recognition. "That's how they do it! Great work Tonbo!"

And indeed it was – what Tonbo had identified as the shackle binding was in fact the uniform's *Banshi*, its nexus thread that gave it form and held it together. Not that Tonbo thought that made his initial idea wrong.

*[I see! It's not the uniform that is held captive, it's each individual thread!]* His mind was running wild, *[And yet, they seem willing to join with me. Am I different from the 'network'? Do the life-fibers think, did they decide to do that? Or am I calling them to me in some way I'm not aware of?]* So many questions, but while he pondered them things kept happening. Mako had grabbed the unconscious cultist by a hand and deposited him safely on the *Namiwokiru*. *[I'll, uh, I'll have to ask Ryuko later.]*

He refocused on the moment, and Mako leapt back into the fray. Now knowing that she could remove an enemy's uniform without killing them was actually a bit of a dilemma – she kept the bayonet ready in her left hand at first, but it was harder than she thought to find openings where she could slow down enough for precision without risking getting attacked from behind. She managed to "free" a couple, but in the end just slid the bayonet back into Tonbo's pocket. A bat was meant to be swung with two hands, and if that meant the sky got clear faster and she could go rescue Japanese sailors faster so be it.

After maybe five more minutes of tuning out, picturing the REVOCS troopers as COVERS, and bashing away Mako had finally cleared the sky. It was now clear enough to the low-ranking cultists that attacking a kamui, even an inexperienced one, was pointless. It was beginning to

drizzle, a light tickling rain that got lifted and spun around in midair by the buffeting wind. Thunder was still rumbling in the distance, distinct from the noise of cannons by its steady permanence. “Huh. Kind of like what Satsuki was saying before, maybe this storm will make REVOCS turn back. Pff, not likely. At least it helps clear out some of that terrible oil smoke smell from the burning ships huh?”

She floated back down to the ship, and immediately set about picking up each of the (still out cold) cultists she’d stripped of their outfits and carefully deposited them into the cabin of a lone helicopter that had gotten wedged to the ship’s railing.

*[... Why?]*

“Because we’re about to start hauling up sailors, shouldn’t we put ‘em here first rather than fly each one all the way back to shore? ‘Cuz more could drown in all that wasted time.”

*[Oh, I see. And it’s probably best to not let the two sides near each other, is it?]*

“Right!” Mako nodded. Once she was done with that, she let Tonbo collapse her bat back to miniature size and then slid it into her pocket, then cracked her knuckles and said, “Okay, no time to waste, huh? Let’s go do what we came here for in the first place!”

~~~~~

Eijiro was sure he was going to die. That was a bit of a running theme in the last half-hour or so, it had happened three times now. The first was when the *Namiwokiru* had capsized, throwing him down into the breathtaking cold of the ocean. He’d expect that the fall would feel like it took forever, but instead it was over before he even realized the ship was sinking. Plunged into the depths it felt like the water had slapped the strength out of him and he was sure he was going to drown. But the waves coughed him back up, and he took one look around and saw the pandemonium of battle raging, and the wide black fins poking above the water in the distance, and he swam for his life.

Past the point of exhaustion, Eijiro kept swimming in the direction he hoped was towards the shore. But he was sure he wouldn’t make it. The shore was miles away, and there was no way one of those hybrid sharks didn’t notice him before then. He didn’t have miles in him anyway. His limbs felt like twigs, powerless against the current, and every kick and arm-stroke was slowed by boots and Kevlar vest (though unbeknownst to him, the vest also had flotation padding inside and doubled as a lifevest, and without it he would indeed have drowned). And he was far too panicked to even think about doing something smart like swimming with the current. All he knew was he didn’t want to get dragged down and bitten in half. Anything but that.

He kept going past the point of exhaustion, and by miraculous fortune something presented itself right in his path. A crate of artillery shells, without enough air inside it that it floated. It was a bit bigger than a refrigerator, large enough that once he was hauled up on it the brute senses of the hybrids below couldn’t detect him. Which was good, because the moment he let himself lay there and rest his exhaustion caught up to him.

*Maybe my heart’s already burst, and I just can’t feel it yet,* He thought. Feeling in anything except his burning lungs was pretty much nonexistent, and the colors and lights that flashed above him were an incomprehensible smear.

*“You don’t have to do this. You’re not hardcore, and you’re definitely not a kamui. You’ve done enough, we’ve done enough. Just come to the shelter with me,”* Rinako’s plea to him came back to him as he watch the dancing lights of Mako’s battle above. *And what did I say? Some drivel about how it’s our home, how I had to do my part. But in the end my part was just to drown. Guess she was right, ordinary people have no place in a real battle.*

Bubbles. Apparently the crate lid wasn’t perfectly sealed. He could feel it slowly listing, it was only a matter of time before it went under. He was surely done for now.

*And she was even calling me her boyfriend, how stupid am I?* Eijiro thought. The thought of how hard he’d swam to survive didn’t fill him with rage, that it was all for nothing. Instead he could only accept, *Looks like this is it. If I was meant to survive, it would’ve have happened by now. Oh well. Have a nice life Rin, if I really do see Lady Ryuko on the other side I’ll tell her to look after you and all the rest of our squadmates.*

As he braced for the frigid embrace of the ocean, a soft, warm light descended around him. He watched it, barely understanding what was happening at first. And when the shape of a woman emerged into his view, he gasped.

He recognized her immediately, but if Mako had seen herself in that moment, she may not have recognized herself. Her hair whipped freely behind her, far from its usual straight-and-simple bowl cut. Tonbo’s glow glistened on the rain and sea spray that covered her face, making those soft, puffy cheeks shine with an ethereal light. And floating there, with Tonbo’s jacket tails flying behind her and his eyes peering down next to hers, she didn’t look like any ordinary woman, even one in a scanty, sexy outfit.

*They really were angels, after all,* Eijiro thought, holding up and hand to her weakly. He drifted, dazed and overcome with relief, and barely processed her scooping him up and flying into the air. He was being carried away from that terrible, dark ocean, and that was all that mattered.

Except then he found himself on solid ground again, this time laid propped next to a group of about ten or so fellow Japanese troopers, all sopping wet and exhausted. He looked around and realized that he was on the control tower of the *Namiwokiru*, in the divot between the floor and a wall that was the only flat surface now that the whole deck was tilted as it was.

As soon as he could he leapt to his feet. *Holy shit, I’m still alive! And that’s the real Mako Mankanshoku, in the flesh!*

“My Lady!” He barked hoarsely. “I… I,” The blood rushing to his head made him feel faint, and as he wobbled Mako caught him.

She regarded him with a smile and lifted his hand up to examine it. “Lookit you, you’re shaking like a leaf!” She hugged him with her whole body, and he gasped at the sheer warmth of it. Overwhelmed by relief, he let out a weak groan and began sobbing. Mako patted him on the back and gently said, “There there, it’s okay. You’re okay now.”

She held him for as long as he needed to stop crying – this wasn’t exactly a surprise for her, all the rest of the men she’d saved had the exact same reaction. When he was down to sniffles, she sat him back down and said, “You rest for now. I’m going to go look for more people one last time, then I’ll start carrying you home, okay?” Eijiro and the others nodded, and she began to drift off the ground.

But before she could fly off, the deck shook. Behind her two hulking figures, only vaguely man-shaped and clad in black and purple armor, slammed onto the deck.

Mako groaned, “Aw, *come on!*”



## Divine Wind: 4

### Chapter Summary

Ornstein and Smough vibes. Also I've been reading the manga Kingdom lately and definitely there's a little of that in some of these enemies too.

October 2068

~~~~~

“Aw, *come on!*” Mako groaned as she turned to face the new arrivals. Without looking, she and Tonbo could tell that these weren’t more low-power footsoldiers. But seeing them did make her gulp.

Whether it was their Ultima Uniforms or their natural stature, both men towered over Mako. Their armor matched too, clearly the same model (and definitely at least a three star from what Tonbo could sense). They had thick black chestplates that curved out from their bodies, huge flat shoulderplates that stuck out from the sides of their bodies like wings, and deep purple capes sweeping from shoulders to feet. But aside from that, their bodies couldn’t have been more different. On the left, the larger of the two of them was a great big tree trunk type – wide and thick of leg and arm and stomach with an impossibly fat neck under his shiny bald head. His face looked tiny and pinched, and he smiled a tiny little purse-lipped smile that didn’t belong on anyone’s face mid-battle. He carried a huge single edged sword, more like a meat cleaver really, though it had a handle in the center so that he might wield it as a sort of staff as well. *That* was definitely a hardened life-fiber weapon, one meant to cut Mako right in half. And this was a guy who looked like he meant to use it for exactly that, like he was utterly confident that Mako would be no threat.

And coupled with the man by his side, Mako felt like she might not be. Where the first man was impossibly thick, his counterpart was thin to the point of emaciation and hunched over. His neck and arms were long and gangly, and to match that he wielded a long glaive with a hooked blade. But what was worst was his face. Pale and jowly like it was made of jello, the only thing that seemed alive about it was the expression in his eyes, peering out from under long, rank, stringy hair. They were haunted, wide and staring and bloodshot, reminding Mako of the drug addicts she saw rambling around Honou-town. Who knew what someone like that was capable of?

“Mako Mankanshoku,” The stocky REVOCS fighter purred, “My, a pretty thing like you out here? You must be lost.” His companion let out a mad, leering laugh. Mako shuddered. “Do not worry. We, Ouchen and Moukou,” He waved a hand elaborately over himself and his companion, “Of the REVOCS Admiral Brotherhood will help you.”

*[Mako, I think these guys are **for real**. Let’s call for help, this is beyond us,]* Tonbo said urgently.

“Good idea,” Mako said, and quickly put a hand to her earpiece, “Hey, uh, Ryuko? Looks like they sent some three-stars after me. Think you could send someone to back me up?”

~ “What? You kidding me Mako?” ~ Ryuko was obviously struck with fear, ~ “Okay, just... stay alive, be safe! I’ll get someone over there and you’ll be fine, got it?”

“Got it!” Mako said and leapt into the air. She needed to keep some distance and lure these guys away from the ordinary people she’d saved. But she was about to learn just how fast events could move in a real battle.

Ouchen leapt right for the huddled sailors, prepared to cut them down. Mako gasped and before she even thought about it she had put herself between them, blocking his swing with her bat. The shock was enough to rock the deck, but she didn’t feel it. Instead, she shouted.

“Hold it! You can’t just go attacking random dudes like that!” Mako angrily reprimanded him, “Haven’t you heard of war crimes, the Genoa Conventions or whatever! These guys aren’t in the fight anymore, you can see that, and that means they’re off limits! What’d they ever do to you, anyway?”

“Oh, just shut up and die already!” Moukou came thrashing in, leaping over Ouchen to try to skewer her. Mako saw it coming, and was relieved that though these guys were fast compared to her it was still slow-motion – just less. She dodged to the side, but before she could decide how to retaliate another strike came, and she had to block that, and then Ouchen tried to hit her again. “What pathetic notions! I shit on the Geneva Conventions!” Moukou shouted, mouth agape.

Mako pulled a repulsed face, and as he and Moukou continued up their combined assault Ouchen laughed and said, “My my, you really are a naïve creature, aren’t you? Of course we don’t care about a few waterlogged peons. But *you* do.” He took another swing towards the men.

Mako gasped and dove to intercept it. She received a lightning quick suggestion from Tonbo and planted both her feet onto the broad, flat blade of his cleaver and forced it into the ground. “Run!” She yelled to the huddled sailors, and despite their exhaustion they did, hurrying in a big tumbling group down the slanted deck of the command tower and then all but sliding along the deck.

“Oof! Strong as they say, and quick too!” Ouchen grunted. He tried to lift his weapon, but Mako drove her feet into it with all her might, and it stayed put. His companion was quick to respond, swinging his glaive wildly with much confusing waving of his cape. It was all Mako could do to keep her feet and put her bat in between herself and each strike, until Ouchen put a stop to this stalemate by removing a hand from his sword’s hilt and punching her right in the gut.

“AAIE!” Mako was sent spinning away into the air. The shock knocked the wind out of her, and she was seized with ever mounting certainty that these two would do whatever it took to kill her. *There’s no choice, I have to go all out against them!* But what did that mean? She couldn’t picture herself managing to get a clean crack at either of their heads, never mind a swipe with her new knife clean enough to rend their uniforms apart without killing them. And the idea that she, with her tiny soft little hands, could actually *kill* hardened warriors? It was odd to admit, considering she was the one with the kamui, but she was intimidated. Even more so because without Tonbo’s speed and strength, she would be long dead already.

She heard Aikuro’s voice on her earpiece, responding to Ryuko, ~ “Mako? What the hell is she doing in the battle?” He sounded worried, not angry, ~ “I’m kinda stuck in the middle here, but I’ll go help her as soon as I get a free escape route!” He was shouting, and behind his voice was a cacophony of screaming and metal clangs and other strange noises.

~ “*Same here!*” ~ This one was Rei. ~ “*If I don’t hear from you, I’ll head over as soon as I can too! That is, if Ira doesn’t beat the both of us to it!*” ~

Oh yeah, that’s right! *Hah! Once Ira gets here, those two will be so screwed!*

~ “*But he doesn’t know! In this form he doesn’t have his earpiece!*” ~ Ryuko shouted.

Uh oh.

Mako righted herself in the air. “No help’s coming, Tonbo.”

*[W-what do we do?]*

The two REVOCS admirals stalked down the ship. Now the men Mako had rescued were huddled, hiding behind a flipped helicopter as though it would do any good, only a few yards of deck left before the place where it slipped below the waves. Their death approached ever-so-slowly, they knew Mako had to come to the rescue.

*[We can hold out until help arrives, it’ll be tough but we can keep them alive,]* Tonbo said. *[If we play it right, we can run circles around them and get them to – wha hey! Mako!]*

Mako didn’t hesitate, instead she just dove right back in. Tonbo could tell, to his alarm, that there was no plan racing through her mind. Just the fact that the situation was unacceptable. “HIYA!” She smashed down on Ouchen right as he went to lift the helicopter, and he barely managed to block it. He grimaced in exertion as Mako swung again and again, pounding his feet into the deck.

“We can’t let these guys even *think* we abandoned them Tonbo, no way! They cried on my shoulder, they were so happy to be alive! We’re their *heroes*! Two random creeps can’t ruin that, not ever!” As soon as he was immobilized, Mako swung with a rotation of her entire body and cracked him right on the side of the head, flattening him to the deck. Then she turned to Moukou and knocked his glaive down, clearing the way to dash inside his reach. He leapt back, nimbler than his comrade, but Mako kept coming and caught him across the face too, sending him tumbling across the deck. “We’ve come this far Tonbo, we can’t stop now!”

*[R-right!]* He replied. How amazing, where Mako had spiralled into panic when she was stabbed earlier, now that she had someone to protect she didn’t need to think to keep on going. She hurried after the prone Moukou, ready to bash his face in. He rose and roared, “ROUUUUHHH!” and turned to her with his face whipped by fury, jaw hanging slack open. His dark eyes and void of a mouth made for a truly ghastly face. Mako flinched.

“Geez! What’s the matter with you!” She yelled, and turned at Tonbo’s prompting to block the returning swipe from Ouchen. Then Mako dashed to get out between them, and then swept around to hit Moukou. He blocked this, and then the second hit, but when he made a counter Mako didn’t block it but just skipped back, just far enough to get out of his reach before rushing right back in. She got a better instinctive gauge of it each time, and that meant she could keep her onslaught relentless. That was all Mako knew, she had no mastery of dueling but she knew how to hit hard and fast. If there weren’t two of them, she would have pummeled either until their energy field popped in short order. But as it was this was the way the battle was set to rage on until one side got tired and made a mistake.

“What’s wrong with *me*?” the lanky savage raved, swiping futilely at Mako as she danced back and forth in front of him. “You smug, stupid *bitch*! As though you don’t even know!” That was almost an amazed laugh, “As though you don’t even know you’re the reason *Lady Ragyo’s DEAD!*”

“What! You’re kidding right?” Mako replied, though admittedly her next blow wasn’t quite so furious as the last. *They blame me? Like I know they want to kill me because I’m Ryuko’s bestie, but why do they blame me?* She was going to smash his face once more, but instead halted long enough for him to block then backed off for another round of dodging. She wanted to hear this. “I mean I was *there*, but what about Ryuko and Satsuki and all!”

Moukou didn’t answer but instead just surged at her with another horse roar, backed up by a devastating two-hand strike from Ouchen. Ouchen was the one who responded after she’d vaulted clear of their range and turned back on the offensive again. “So sorry about him, my dear,” He said, with the tiny little pursed grin still on his grotesquely fat face, “I’m afraid caring for such tortured souls as my brother here is our lot in REVOCS. Why, he’s never been the same ever since back then, before he came to us. Did you know? He used to be a professor. Kicked out! Fired!” He put a hand over his mouth as though scandalized, a needless extravagance in a fight that gave Mako a chance to land a blow on him – though he was so huge and robust it barely shook him. “They such terrible things about his papers. ‘Eugenics’, ‘genocidal’, ‘no place in our university’, and for what? For saying what everyone already knew, but wouldn’t dare speak? That if our species was to survive its worthless dregs would have to be killed? That the only way for the productive, the intelligent to survive was if the thoughtless, overpopulating pigs were allowed to reap the consequences of their weakness?”

*[What is this man raving about! How could that freak ever be a professor, especially believing such horrid things!]* Tonbo exclaimed and Mako landed in a crouch, on her feet and one hand, bat trailing behind her. She just grimaced as she jumped up high above Moukou’s head and plunged down lightning fast onto him, threading nimbly between the slow-motion strikes of his glaive. *[So this is the kind of man that commands REVOCS.]*

It was starting to really rain now. A thick downpour. It didn’t slow Mako down any – Tonbo allowed her to put so much force into each step that she practically adhered to the surface and would never slip. But she used it to her advantage, more by instinct than design. She left confounding, glittering trails through the storm with every motion, and each time she changed direction it became harder to pick her out as she blasted the droplets out of her way and turned them to foam. Each clash of weapons was marked by an afterimage, a wide shockwave of water. Mako’s hair was kept dry just by the sheer heat emanating from Tonbo, but now Moukou’s was a soaked mop and Ouchen’s bald head was shiny.

“Can you imagine how hurt he was? How humiliated?” Ouchen bellowed jollily over the rain, “All he ever wanted was to help the worthy learn, but now he couldn’t! And soon he lost everything else too – his car, his home, his wife!”

“Well good for her!” Mako retorted. That only seemed to make Moukou even more enraged. He was overextending, off balance.

“All because they were too afraid of what the *pigs* like *you* would think when they heard what he had to say! Can you imagine the suffering he endured?” Ouchen asked. He wasn’t slipping, his puffy eyes were still leering with evident confidence at Mako. “I can only thank the Goddess he found the light. In REVOCS, can you imagine his joy when he learned that all was well. He was

right, the weak were meant to die, to power our ascension, so that we might all go to paradise.” He spread his arms wide, like a buddha, as though inviting an attack. Mako instinctively obliged, skidding past Moukou to charge directly at his massive, mountainous girth.

“And if it weren’t for you, all of that would’ve come to pass,” Ouchen suddenly scowled in contempt and he swung with such force the ship shook, a perfect horizontal chop meant to turn Mako into two pieces. But she avoided it. He followed up without a second thought, swinging diagonally from shoulder height to catch her as she jumped.

Only she hadn’t jumped. She slid, one leg tucked under her, and arrived right next to his legs with a triumphant glint in her eyes. It was just for a moment, but it had clicked for both Mako and Tonbo – why Ryuko liked to fight *for real*. *Got you!* was all she thought as she twisted her whole body, a home run drive for the ball of his fat ankle. It connected with a crack that raced electric through Ouchen’s whole body, and he grunted an undignified thin noise as his feet rocketed away, tumbling him end over end until his giant body just rolled off the ship’s deck.

For the first time, Moukou’s unceasing berserk rage was replaced with something else. He looked shocked, his resolve broken. To Mako’s disappointment though, Ouchen had not spilt all the way into the ocean. His huge hand had a vise grip on the edge of the deck, and he hauled himself up like it was nothing. But there was a big red vein popping on his bald head where it had been perfectly smooth before, and his smile looked just a bit more forced. “Oh my! My my my *that hurt!*” He said, and Moukou’s wrath was restored doubly.

“DIEEEE!” Moukou shrieked as he plunged towards Mako, and for a moment she was decidedly on the defense again. A tornado of stabs and broad thrusts, each fluidly transitioning into the next, forced Mako to block and shimmy backwards. She yelped when she parried and a jolt of pain from her stabbed arm shooting up to her shoulder – that was the first hit strong enough to send a shock. His movements were too unpredictable to her untrained eye for her to see an opening. “Enough!” He raged, “You are the reason Ragyo is dead and you WILL NOT MOCK ME!”

“Chill!” Mako blurted, too caught up in trying to get past Moukou’s second wind for any witty retort. “You keep saying that but you *know* I’m not so what’s your deal?”

They clashed, glaive blade on the thick seamless metal of her bat, Mako planting her feet with all her might to avoid slipping, him looming down above her as if to crush her under his weight. “Yes you are! Oh, yes you are! You broke Ryuko’s bond with Junketsu!” He seethed, eyes bloodshot and wide as saucers, “Without *you*, she would have destroyed you all! Like she was meant to!”

[*Oh, I see,*] Tonbo thought for Mako, [*So it all stems from that moment*]. He also guided her to give a little and leap back at great speed, so that Moukou’s blade slid off her bat and he stumbled forwards. She followed up on that little impulse by quickly turning back to go for an overhead bash, but Moukou just barely managed to block. The shockwave of the impact again blasted away the rain for just a moment, and Mako’s arm got another shot of pain.

“Ngh!” She grunted, but she resisted the urge to switch to a one-handed stance. She wasn’t so sure she could wield such a long weapon that way. *It’s only pain*, she reminded herself, *not even your dominant hand. Ryuko got her guts ripped out by Ragyo, more than once, and that didn’t stop her!* And just thinking about that made Mako’s anger rise. “You’re crazy! Ryuko wasn’t bonded to Junketsu, it was *mind controlling* her! I set her free!” She shouted between attacks, letting her arms and her and Tonbo’s shared instincts do the work. “She wasn’t meant to kill us, she was meant to stop Ragyo and save the world from the very start!”

“Lies! Lady Ragyo determined the destiny of all things! She tamed Ryuko because even her anathema was powerless against her without *you*! You brainless nobody who dared to meddle in the affairs of gods!” Moukou responded, and as Ouchen re-entered the fight their duel continued as it had before. “Blundering in, without any idea of what you have done, for the mere pretense of friendship with the destroyer? Ragyo rewrote her karma, showed her a bliss her wretched heart could never have conceived of, and you –“

“That’s so not true!” Mako interrupted, “I was there, I was the one who saw it, and I know what I saw! Ragyo took advantage of Ryuko, in *every way*!” She might’ve reminded herself there was no persuading him, that shouting back would only waste focus she needed to fight, but she was past that point. “You think you know anything about it? You’re the one who’s lying, to *yourself*!” Mako bashed at Moukou repeatedly, totally fixated on beating through his defenses until Tonbo alerted her to Ouchen’s attack from behind. Fully trusting him, she wheeled around and smacked his weapon away, dashed away to stop them from surrounding her and then right back in to keep the onslaught up. “You know deep down that nobody *good* would ever mind control someone and force them to kill their friends! And that’s not even the half of it! You wanna know what else your *goddess* did? She *raped* Ryuko! That’s right! And Satsuki too, and who knows who else!”

Moukou roared back, “It matters not!” Mako whisked away into the air and he chased, leaping harder and faster than she’d expected, even with his uniform.

She zipped away and he chased, propelled by retro-thrusters between the plates of his armor. Hundreds of feet up, they clashed again and again before the thrusting power of the three-star finally ran out and Moukou fell. Mako chased after and when Ouchen leapt up to intercept her she buzzed right past him and all the way back to the deck of the ship they fought. “Don’t tell me, you think because she was mind controlled into wanting it, it doesn’t count? That they were *in love* or something? Don’t lie to yourself!”

“Pah!” Moukou scoffed dismissively, “You truly understand nothing!” The more heated she became, the faster Mako’s crude, wildly swinging flurries were. Both he and Ouchen were having to try much harder now to keep the pressure on – the vein on Ouchen’s forehead revealed that. And Moukou’s cavernous mouth no longer hung open, his teeth were clenched in a grimace of concentration. Now the shape of the lines on his face made sense, and Mako could see a trace of a former professor poking through. It frightened Mako, and frightened Tonbo more because he could see now that he wasn’t purely mad, he was thinking, and speaking not in a fuming attempt to contradict everything Mako said but because he believed it. “Lady Ragyo was the perfect being. This is fact. I don’t need to dress her actions up, call them something nicer, because they were all by definition perfect! Anything she desired was hers to take, she owned this world and everything on it! She raped Ryuko because that was the fate ordained by the *universe*!”

“YOU DON’T MEAN THAT! EVEN YOU, YOU CAN’T MEAN THAT!”

“And it’s nothing compared to what *we*’ll do when we finally catch her! Before we use her as a vessel for Ragyo’s rebirth, we’ll teach her to regret going with you that day!” He howled, mouth back open wide as ever. Ouchen giggled through his smug smirk. “And we’ll give you a taste too, after we removed those pesky arms you’ll see what’s in store for your ‘friend’ when we win, WHEN WE FULFILL OUR DESTINY!”

He lunged forward for a brutal strike, invigorated and sure he was about to finish her off, but Mako was gone. She’d already dashed away to the top precipice of the deck, and there she stood scowling down at them. The wind whipped her hair wildly and the rain behind her formed a

constant sheet, only interrupted by distant lightning bolts. She pointed her bat at Moukou, a straight line from her shoulder to its tip, but shaking. Her hands were shaking. She and Tonbo were of one mind when they spoke.

“The others are always talking about how many poor, brainwashed fools there are in REVOCS, did you know that?” She shouted, voice hoarse, no longer holding anything back, “Well maybe there are some of you like that, I don’t know, but you know what I think? They’re wrong about you! You are EVIL!”

~ \*BOOM!\* ~

A bolt of lightning as thick as a school bus ripped from the sky and fell right upon Moukou. It didn’t just strike him, it *engulfed* him, exploding upon the deck and carving still further down, a smoking hole all the way down to the sea. Mako had always seen lightning pictured with a yellow or blue glow around it, but the real deal was nothing like that. It was pure, unadulterated white. She shrieked in surprise and shielded her eyes from the irresistible brightness of it. When she opened them, there was nothing left to see of Moukou. Just some life-fibers drifting peacefully into Tonbo’s seams, and the lightly singed blade of his hardened life-fiber blade.

“Hoh! My god!” Mako exclaimed, so caught up her own shock. “Look at that, he’s just... incinerated! Nothing left, not even a skeleton!” She shuddered at the thought that he’d only a second ago been standing right on that spot. “I mean what are the chances!”

*[No, Mako, it’s-]*

“I guess there must be tons of other people getting struck by lightning tonight, huh, just crazy we got a chance to see it!” She exclaimed, suddenly relaxed and gabby again. Like her, Ouchen was so shocked that he just stood there – the fight was clearly over. “I would’ve thought they’d put lightning rods on the ships though, huh? Guess this one broke off.”

*[Mako, this... I don’t think it was an accident...] Tonbo said softly, [I... think I did it.]*

Mako’s back straightened. “You did?” She squeaked out.

*[I did. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I felt a thread go through him. Like, one of the threads through the air I pull us along to make us fly? It went right through him and right up to the sky, and I grabbed on it and pulled! As hard as I could,]* He exclaimed, more than a little horrified, *[I wasn’t thinking I just... wanted to crush him.]*

“Wait,” Mako said, looking at her own trembling hands. Her palms were wet from carrying the sailors, but that was it. She patted her hair and found it dry too. Not a single raindrop had landed on her since the fight had started. “No way.”

Suddenly it all clicked.

Mako staggered back, lightheaded, staring at the sky. She saw it all, roiling clouds and unnatural red streaks and shockingly frequent lightning strikes in a totally new light now. She saw all of it, felt a trace of the threads Tonbo spoke of in the prickling of her skin – she was shocked how sensitive she was to even the minutest drifts and perturbations in the wind. “Then... this is you! You did this!”

*[I think so. I must have!]* His voice shook with the thrill, *[Wow...]* After a moment to simply admire it, he said, *[It – it must respond to my emotions. The further in we went, the worse things became, the deeper the storm.]*

“Just like Satsuki said,” Mako murmured, “The divine storm, to sweep the invaders away!”

Tonbo was alarmed, *[Now, hold on! I didn't mean to do this, I didn't even know I could.]* But now that he knew...

Mako held her free hand out, palm flat vertical as if signalling for something to stop. Tonbo could feel the impulse coming from her, but, *[What are you trying to get me to do?]*

“I dunno,” She shrugged, “Stop the rain in front of my hand?”

He tried. He could always feel the threads, the invisible currents of the air. But he never believed before this he could move them on their own, not just as a way to lift Mako's body. The droplets bent, the direction of the rain in front of Mako flexed into a curve and directed them away. Mako grinned and giggled, but no, that wasn't the extent of it. That little expenditure, gingerly poking at the threads, that wasn't enough to call down a lightning bolt with the power to sheer through a three-star's defenses. No, he could do more!

This time Tonbo grabbed the threads and forced them to be still. The rain froze, suspended on a cushion of utter stillness, more and more droplets gathering together. They formed a flat pool, suspended in air, perfectly still and reflective. Mako peered into it and gasped, looking at her transfigured self for the first time. The glow from Tonbo was so powerful now it seemed to permeate her, shining out white through her skin like a faint backlight. She looked... stronger somehow, like her back was straighter, and as she looked at the lady before her Mako thought, *I look more like a model than any Mako Mankanshoku I've ever seen before. Like a statue!* She touched her cheek, ran her hand down the side of her body, even gave her chest a light shake (and thank goodness, it wasn't a statue after all) *Is this really me?*

She thought of Ryuko. *She was just an ordinary girl once too. But then she found Senketsu, and before she knew it she had become something else. But she was still Ryuko!*

“Tonbo, you're just... you're just so amazing!” She threw her arms around her body and squeezed as tight as she could.

*[Is this – are you meant to be giving me a hug right now?]* Tonbo asked with amusement.

“MHM!” Mako firmly nodded, but eventually that broke into a little laugh and she unwound her arms and said, “I'm trying! I'm doing my best, don't make fun! I just think, I need to do something so you know...”

*[I know. Believe me, I do,]* He said tenderly, *[I couldn't do it without you.]*

“Nah, whaddya mean? It's your power.”

*[My emotions are yours Mako. We knew as one what we had to do to that horrible man,]* He felt a terrible weight just saying it, but it was true. *[This storm is your feelings as much as mine.]*



Mako nodded, "Only, I don't feel angry anymore, or even scared. I don't... even feel so sure he had to die any more. We couldn't have ever made him turn good again, I don't think, but... he was right there and now he's just *gone*." The thought of it, that for as wretched as Moukou had been he'd once just been a normal person, and now he couldn't ever be again all because of what *she'd* decided - she could feel tears coming in the corners of her eyes. But she kept it together and said, "If I'm not angry anymore, you'd think the storm would stop."

*[Only, you still want to use it, don't you?]* Tonbo finished the thought.

"I do," Mako said, "We have to end the battle, Tonbo. We can't let this go on any longer."

*[Absolutely.]*

They prepared to lift off the ship, without really a plan other than to use every ounce of Tonbo's power to founder and break the entire REVOCS fleet. But before they could leave, they spotted a hulking form, creeping across the deck towards them. Ouchen.

*[Oh, he's still here.]*

Mako turned to face him, no longer intimidated whatsoever. "I see you!" She shouted to him. "Dya still wanna fight?"

"How? HOW!" Ouchen screamed, "How did you do that! I-it's impossible, it can't be happening!" His smile was gone now, all that shiny skin was tomato red and his teeth were gritted in a furious grimace.

Mako turned to him. She smiled and said, "Can't figure it out? *This* is Tonbo's power. He's a kamui that controls the weather."

Ouchen's eyes bulged, "That's not possible!" If it were, he was already deep within Tonbo's domain. He couldn't seem to accept it. "You were supposed to be no threat! You were supposed to be weak!"

Mako floated down, landed right before him. He took a swipe at her, but she just drifted back slightly, not intimidated in the least. "You know, any one of my friends would have just chopped your head off right away. They're much better fighters than me, no question. So you should consider yourself lucky you ran into someone as weak as me." Ouchen's face went even redder, if that were possible - the vein popping from his forehead was now just part of a huge web across his entire bald head. He leapt at her again, furiously trying to cut her down, but Mako kept one step ahead easily, " 'Cuz if you'd tried this on like, Uzu or someone, you wouldn't stand a - alright come on now, could you put the sword down? I just wanna talk!"

"FUCK YOU CUNT!" Ouchen shrieked, "GO DIE!"

Mako's lip curled but she cheerily said, "Rude! There's no need for that! I just wanted to ask, you seem like a kinda normal guy, why'd you team up with such an obvious nut? I mean, he wanted to kill everyone even *before* he joined REVOCS!"

"WHAT? ARE YOU CONDESCENDING TO ME? HOW DARE YOU CONDESCEND TO ME! I'LL GOUGE YOUR EYES OUT!" Spittle flew from Ouchen's mouth as he charged forward, heedless and hunched forward like a beast.

“No but seriously! Why’d you come after me?” Mako asked, “I didn’t want to do anything but rescue some sailors, I wasn’t trying to fight! If you just thought you had to, because I’m Ryuko’s friend and a Kamui wearer I get it, that doesn’t make you evil that’s what you’re taught to believe!”

If Ouchen had been listening closely, he would have seen that this was his out. He wasn’t listening closely, “WHY? YOU KILLED THE GODDESS YOU STUPID, STUPID BITCH!” He cackled the words out. “IT’S TO MAKE YOU SUFFER AS WE HAVE SUFFERED! IT’S TO HUMILIATE YOU AS WE HAVE BEEN HUMILIATED! YOU ARE JUST A NOBODY, A COMMONER, AN IDIOT, AND YOU THINK YOU ARE ABOVE US, ABOVE ME? ALL THE WORSE THAT YOU’RE RYUKO’S FRIEND, YOU SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO EVEN APPROACH HER! YOU’RE HONOU-TOWN TRASH, AND THAT’S ALL YOU EVER WILL BE!”

He leapt with his hands behind his head, readying a massive overhead swing to cleave Mako in half. She didn’t dodge. “Don’t bother,” she said, “You’re already in Tonbo’s grasp.”

~ **\*BOOM!\*** ~

Another blinding flash, another bolt of lightning, and Ouchen was swallowed too. And this time when it dissipated Mako stood there, quiet. It was done, she’d met the REVOCS elite, and she’d killed them. She thought about what Ira had said to her, the day the kamui had first attacked. “*Mako, you’re the only one in our circle who hasn’t committed a single murder. I can’t let you change that.*” And yet here they were. “Well then where were you?” She said to nobody in particular, “You said it wouldn’t come to this!”

A pang of guilt from Tonbo, [*Mako, that’s... that’s not fair, is it? If he could have come, Ira would have. You know that. And besides, I was the one who wanted to come out here...*] That fell hollow even as he said it. They did things together, that was the only way for a kamui and their human.

“No, you’re right, you’re right,” Mako felt a stinging in the corners of her eyes. She bit it down – these were the evil REVOCS, not the misguided, she knew neither Ryuko nor Ira would shed any tears for them. But she thought with newfound fright about how the two of them were gone, just like that. They were the top echelon of REVOCS, the ones who sent their brainwashed followers to die, but killing them was just so... final. “This is what I asked for, after all. We all said, back when Ryuko was making you, that just because you were a kamui didn’t mean you’d have to kill. That it would be different this time. But looks like it wasn’t.”

[*Maybe, but if the other option is me not existing?*] Tonbo said seriously, [*I’m not sorry.*] And Mako knew she wasn’t either. She couldn’t imagine going back to the way things were, [*And I’m not sorry if we have to kill more of them tonight, if it means we can put ourselves between them and ordinary people.*]

“Yeah,” She couldn’t help but agree. No, she understood better than ever why Ryuko used to insist on patrolling, fighting crime, helping people in need at night and why that was now a part of kamui training. She and Tonbo could put themselves between ordinary people and danger, they had no excuse not to.

[*Though, we can try to keep it safe, no?*] He offered, a slight note of optimism. He directed his attention to the currents of air surrounding the nearest REVOCS battleship. [*Let me*

*see, if I don't hit the engine, or let it sink too fast, then all I'll be doing is keeping them stuck in place, right?]*

"I dunno," Mako said, "Try it?"

The threads aligned towards the heavens and another bolt of lightning, impossibly large like the last, tore down the side of the ship. In one instant it did what dozens of missiles could not and ripped a huge vertical hole in the titanium reinforced bow, into which the water foamed. Before their eyes the entire battleship groaned, listed and began to sink. *[Ooh, sinking a bit fast, isn't it?]* He winced.

"Go for the rudders next time!" Mako suggested as they turned around to target a ship passing by on the other side. But since they were underwater, that turned out to be more difficult than it seemed. So Tonbo changed tactics, seizing the wind and hurling against the hull of the ship until the waves churned into a whirlpool of titanic proportions, bobbing the ship up and down violently. It took a second, but then with a wrenching noise and a huge shudder something at the back of the ship snapped off, and it began to slow and drift forward aimlessly. It was hundreds of yards away, so Mako couldn't see exactly what it was doing. But then a huge explosion rocked the deck next to her and she felt the tickle of shrapnel race over her skin. "AHH! The guns, right! We gotta stop 'em from shooting!"

She leapt off the *Namiwokiru* and beelined for the offending ship. It attempted to snag her from the air with a hail of flak and rockets, but that was never going to work and before the crew's terrified eyes she was suddenly standing perched on the deck's railing. Some tried to leap to the attack, but she ignored them and instead ran a circle around the deck, bashing every tubular gun barrel she saw poking out so it bent at a ninety degree angle. "There!" Mako proudly declared, "That's one battleship turned into a big metal rowboat! Only..." She looked out towards the REVOCS fleet. Still more ships were pouring through the wall of smoke as she spoke, "Uh, a lot more to go!"

*[Well, proof of concept,]* Tonbo said, *[We ought to take the sailors we rescued home then come back and keep going though.]*

"Oh! Right," Mako said sheepishly, and they turned and flew back to the *Namiwokiru*. But when they got there, they were surprised to see a new person standing on the deck, with the sailors struggling to stand at attention behind her.

"Satsuki!" Mako exclaimed and as she landed, she skipped over to give Satsuki a hug, "What're you doing out here?"

"I came to help you," Satsuki said, "Everyone is fighting battles of their own, they couldn't come to help."

"Yeah, I noticed. And I thought, best stay away!"

Satsuki smiled, "Indeed, a wise choice. Well, Ryuko and I didn't take long to decide we'd waited long enough. And I came to assist you. But it seems things went the *other* way."

Mako looked down at Moukou's charred glaive-blade, "... Yeah."

Satsuki frowned softly, "You did well. From what I remember of REVOCS back in the old days, those two were commanders. They were probably in charge of this section of the battle,

which explains why it is now grinding to a halt. They must have been skilled warriors, it can't have been easy."

"No, not really," Mako shrugged. *So Satsuki knows we killed them*, she felt rather embarrassed, no way Satsuki thought it was a big deal, *And she knows we probably killed a few of their minions before that*. "If it weren't for Tonbo, I wouldn't've stood a chance."

"Did you really call down lightning on them?" Satsuki said, abruptly and enthusiastically. "I saw it in the distance, and I think that's what these troopers are trying to say but their teeth keep chattering."

Now this Mako was excited about, "Yup! Tonbo's gotten the hang of his power to control the weather! I-I mean, he's the one that does it directly, but we kind of do it together, y'know?" She didn't want to leave Tonbo in the lurch as the one to blame for all the violence.

"That's remarkable! I merely thought it was a product of Tonbo's radiant power changing the air pressure or such," Satsuki admired the new glow emerging from Tonbo, "Then, this storm, this is you too isn't it?" Mako nodded vigorously and Satsuki said, "Even after all I've seen, *this* is a new one."

"I know, it's awesome! And I can help too now, watch, we can knock a ship's propeller off and that knocks it right out of the fight! Without, y'know, killing anyone, or at least give 'em a chance to abandon ship or..." Mako trailed off.

"Are you alright?" Satsuki asked with concern. And then, with alarm "Mako! You're wounded!" She rushed over and gingerly lifted Mako's wounded arm.

"Oh, that? It's nothing, just a little scrape," Mako said, "Tonbo patched it up really well. And it wasn't even those admiral guys who did it, it was just a guy a tried to pull out of the water but who turned out to be REVOCS."

The intense look in Satsuki's eyes told Mako she well understood what a shock that had been to Mako. "Well, I see that you're physically fine, but are you *sure* you're alright?"

Mako sighed a big breath out her cheeks, shoulders deflating a bit, and she decided to let it all out. "Geez, Satsuki, I didn't want it to be like this! I knew that even if I saved a hundred of 'em that wouldn't be a dent, but I had to do something!" She wailed.

"I know. You must not blame yourself, though. They were the ones who chose violence, not you."

"No, it's not just that. They really hate me, you know that? For when I freed Ryuko from Junketsu. That's what I just don't get!"

"Ah, I see. And you can't help but think, about how good it was to get her back. And then them wishing it never happened," Satsuki nodded.

"I know!" Mako loudly agreed, "I'm just thinking about it again and it *still* tears me up! They thought what Ragyo did to her was *good*!" She made an angry growling noise and shouted, directed mostly at the REVOCS battleships now drifting in disarray around them, "I just can't let people who think like that win, okay? I just can't! That's all there is to it!"

Satsuki put her hand on Mako's shoulder, gave her a firm smile, "Yes. That is all there is to it." That answer took Mako by surprise a bit. She was too distracted by everything to fully comprehend how angry she was, but looking into Satsuki's utterly calm, assured eyes she felt the tumultuous feeling in her chest die down. "I think you fully understand it now. Why we fight."

*Oh. So that's what this is, Mako realized, Of course Satsuki would feel the same way. She's probably felt that way about Ragyo since she was a child. She couldn't let someone like that win, no matter what.* Protecting the world was what they were fighting for in the practical sense, and Mako knew that made it completely right and necessary. But it was such a lofty, distant goal compared to this conviction she felt now. She thought about what Mataro had said the night Ryuko had nearly been poisoned. That the spies behind it were the real monsters. She understood what he meant now. People who thought it was okay to do something like that to Ryuko, to her baby, you could never let them win.

"Does that make you feel any better? We can talk more about it later if you want," Satsuki said hesitantly.

"Yeah, I think so," Mako said, and she gave Satsuki another hug.

"Good. Then we should start carrying your rescue-ees to shore. As much as I'd like to watch Tonbo destroy the fleet with his new power, I think they've had enough for today."

"Oh! Right," Mako grinned sheepishly. As much as all of those lucky men had witnessed a scene they would never forget, just the same they all wanted nothing more than to get to land, get dry, and lead long and happy lives somewhere far from the ocean. Mako and Satsuki each picked one of them up, found the rest a safe hiding spot below the ship's command tower, and lifted off in the direction of Japan.

They hadn't gotten far though when a booming voice echoed over the thunder. **"MAKO! WHERE ARE YOU!"**

They both knew instantly who it was, though the gigantic musclebound silhouette wading through the rain and smoke towards them helped to.

"Oh dear," Satsuki said with amusement, "Looks like Ira finally noticed something was amiss."

# Divine Wind and the Titan

October 2068

~~~~~

Ryuko could barely resist flying out there herself as she felt Satsuki approach. Coming back alone. She strained to feel for Tonbo's presence, but could only detect it faintly, a distant scent wafting in and out. *Is that just me hoping? Is it really there?* And she had a hard time assuaging that worry because there was something weird about Tonbo's vague aura. Amid the swirl of battle kamui poked through the swarm like sewing needles through fabric, but Tonbo's presence wasn't like that. It pervaded everything, like a cloud gently misting over the battlefield. Ryuko had never witnessed anything like it before, and she didn't like it. *Is this the thing I've been dreading? It could be.*

The thought of Mako cut down by merciless REVOCS savages was bad enough, *But if she is dead, then I have to wait **ten days** before I can go over to the other side and overwrite it. Doing more than an hour or so, I said I'd never do that. Ten days! Million's of people's lives could be entirely different because of the butterfly effect. But for Mako, I guess I have to.* Mako wasn't permitted to die – not that Ryuko thought of it that way. *No matter how long, for her, or Satsuki, or Mom and Dad, or my Daughter – wait, shit, my daughter! If I go back from after she's born, then what'll happen! I've spent the last nine months avoiding going to the other side at all costs so I wouldn't risk **ever** messing with her that way. And now I might have to!*

Satsuki flew up, coming to a halt slowly and carefully. She was fireman-carrying two bedraggled soldiers, one over each shoulder. They were totally limp, their uniforms clinging to their shivering bodies, their weapons and bulletproof vests long since shed. Satsuki tilted her body from a horizontal flight position to vertical, and Ryuko carefully but hastily tamped the flames from her thrusters so she could set her feet on the ground. She set the men down, and they dropped to their knees. They stared in amazement at the solid ground, and once they realized they had made it they would recover quickly and be hurried off by medics. But Ryuko didn't care about that, "Where's Mako?" She demanded, "What happened?"

Satsuki was unphased by the rough way Ryuko barked that out. She was smiling, and said, "Quite a lot, actually. From what I've put together, two of their highest commanders attacked Mako, but she fought them back admirably. They duelled for several minutes, Mako torn between the innate combat superiority of Kamui Tonbo and the knowledge that her imprecise technique meant she couldn't use his full power to subdue them without risk of killing them. But in the end one of them said something that made Mako furious, I have to assume it was about *you* - I was still on my way - and she no longer cared if she killed them. And that, it seems, prompted Tonbo to access a new ability and, well, despite Mako's later regret they destroyed them."

Ryuko broke into a broad grin, her relief beaming through her. She didn't care much about that last part. She pumped her face and said, "Alright! Now *that's* what I've been waiting for! So, don't keep me in suspense now, what's this new ability? She doesn't need a flight mode, so maybe a long-ranged attack... oh! I bet it's something to let her fight with her fists, or maybe a second pair of fists! Like how her goku uniform had those sleeves, remember that?"

"Well, not quite," Satsuki shrugged coyly.

“Aw c’mon Sats, there’s no time for guessing games!” Ryuko huffed, pretending to be upset, “This is war!”

“Hmhmhm, you’re right of course dear. They have mastered their power to control the weather,” Satsuki said simply. “They killed the REVOCS commanders by striking them with bolts of lightning.”

“You’re serious?” Satsuki was serious. “That’s fucking awesome! And if I’m hearin’ you right, then that means this whole storm that’s suddenly popped up above the battle, that’s... I mean, that’s *them!*” Ryuko said, breathless as she watched the storm in front of her with new appreciation. *That* was why she thought those were his traces, they *were!* The whole thing was run through with his invisible fingers! “How is that even possible?”

Satsuki chuckled again, “After everything we’ve seen, you still doubt it?”

“Well, only a little,” Ryuko responded in a chagrined murmur. “Just ‘cuz I’ve never seen a kamui who could reach out from their wearer like that.”

“Yes, that is striking, isn’t it? But then, Mako was always one to light a room up, and on the rare occasion that she’s upset it affects the mood of everyone. Well, now Tonbo amplifies that to carry for miles around.”

“No way, you mean it’s based off her mood?” Ryuko asked, and when Satsuki nodded she went on, “Goddamn, then she must be *really* pissed!”

“Oh, she was. Like I said, they apparently said something about you which... well, REVOCS and you, you can fill in the blanks,” Satsuki said.

“Right,” Ryuko shuddered. She could easily imagine them saying exactly what they wanted to do to her, if ever they caught her.

Satsuki said, “At least, she was quite furious. I think she’s calmed down now, but this power doesn’t appear to be entirely based on Mako’s mood. She’s decided to use it to help us defeat the enemy.”

“Wha-,” The simplicity with which Satsuki delivered that news stopped Ryuko in shock, with her mouth open. “What *happened* out there?”

Satsuki shrugged, as if to say, “*You already know*”, and Ryuko realized that she did. That Satsuki wasn’t keeping her descriptions short out of a militant sense of urgency, but because for people used to living among kamui these moments were felt, not spoken. Mako and Tonbo had passed through the fire on their own and come out the other side stronger – both physically and in their bond. Ryuko considered all that and nodded, and Satsuki said, “I think she just realized what was at stake, and what she could do. Anyone in her position would’ve done the same.” That was one of Ryuko’s own lines, so she couldn’t help but smile.

But then as she squinted out toward the battlefield she saw something that made her brow furrow. Ira’s towering *Kyojin* form, off on the west side of the battle where the ship Mako had flown off to was. He was standing still, completely ignoring the battle and all the explosions that puffed off his skin. And she could just barely see a little pinprick of white light in his hand. “Hey, uh, y’know she might still be a little upset about something, actually.”

“Yes, that is the end of my story: why she’s not here now. It is very important that she square things with Ira right away,” Satsuki nodded.

“Well no kidding! He must’ve thought she was dead!” Ryuko exclaimed with raised eyebrows, “And even besides, how happy can he be to see her out there, especially since she just *killed* some people!”

“...Yes.” When Tonbo was made, it had been an implicit fact accepted by everyone that he wasn’t for use in combat. It was the fulfillment of Ryuko’s long-time maxim that kamui were not just weapons and Satsuki obviously liked the sound of that. But neither of them seriously thought that extended to what was clearly a self-defense situation. Satsuki was considering for the first time that Ira may have felt differently about that, and she regretted not thinking it sooner.

Ryuko had heard all about that from Mako though. “I guess it’s too late now, huh? It’ll be alright, but I can see why she’d be, yknow, nervous about that conversation. To put it light. Especially if she’s gonna help out from now on by killing even more people!”

Satsuki looked thoughtful, “Well, she did say she thought they could disable the ships without killing the people on board. Maybe she intends to target their cannons with lightning or rip their rudders off. So that might not be so bad.” Ryuko nodded; yes, that would be better. Worth a try anyway. “Reminds me though,” Satsuki said, and she put a hand to her earpiece and barked, “All ships! Disengage to minimum safe distance and await further orders! The storm will destroy the enemy now. Take it slow and steady, don’t let up your guard!” Ryuko could hear the responses crackle back, captains quickly agreeing. They were totally astonished, but she could hear the smile in their voices underneath. When an admiral in charge of a section of the line asked her what was happening, Satsuki declared to everyone, “Mako Mankanshoku has joined the battle. Her kamui’s power has summoned this storm.”

There was an awed silence, a murmured prayer. After a moment Ryuko could hear the sailors aboard the ships get over their shock and begin cheering. They were so relieved the battle was as good as over, and despite herself Ryuko felt a twinge of annoyance. *That’s right, they don’t have to fight at all. Why didn’t I think of that?*

“So, how are things going here?” Satsuki asked.

“Alright,” Ryuko spread a hand behind her casually. The stars, covered though they were by stormclouds, were mirrored by a multitude of specks of orange glow across the land. Each was a fire burning, and around many soldiers and vehicles milled in a constant agitation. She passed Satsuki’s tablet computer back over to her, and as Satsuki analyzed the situation she explained, “The front line got closer enough that they started shooting at our onshore artillery, but they didn’t get far into that before the storm started. So like, only ten batteries got hit before they couldn’t aim straight anymore and since then they’ve only gotten two more.” Satsuki nodded – better than she’d expected. “Oh, and the air battle is pretty much over and the enemy planes scattered to the horizon to get away. You shoulda seen it when they tried to fly over and the anti-air guns started up, it was like a fireworks show!”

“I see, well that is fortunate. If they’d made it past us, they would have indiscriminately bombed everything they could see. Have you noticed, by the way, how there are search parties out in the woods looking for any pilots that bailed?” Satsuki pointed out, to where the white pinpricks of DTR searchlights popped out intermittently between the tree trunks.



Ryuko said, “Not just bailouts, actually. Turns out with their Ultima Uniforms they can survive a crash, too. Ah, but it’s no big deal, when it’s only one of ‘em at a time our boys can handle it no problem!”

“I don’t doubt that,” Satsuki said. She passed the tablet back, “So it seems things did not fall apart in my absence,” She said, and when Ryuko gave her a bemused look she laughed and said, “Not that I thought they would. Good work dear.”

“Pssh, I didn’t do anythin’,” Ryuko waved her off modestly, but it was true that she felt frustratingly useless just standing there. *I have long-ranged attacks too! I could have shot down those planes myself, only I’m not supposed to!* She wanted to explain that to the troops, afraid they were wondering why she wasn’t protecting them.

As they watched, Mako drifted off Ira’s hand, floating in the air just above his right shoulder. Now Satsuki could see the light too – it was growing brighter, and Ryuko could feel Tonbo’s power swelling. It contracted in points above the nearby ships, searching for outlets. And it found them.

First one clap of thunder, one thin shaft of white lightning. Then two, then ten, then suddenly the whole scene went fuzzy as the rain came down twice as hard and lightning raced through the clouds and down so fast that it strobed, too many for Ryuko even to count, and the thunder became a new continuous roar on top of that of the artillery blasts. The wind racing inland grew cold and misty with salt spray as the waves whipped up and lashed against the sea wall.

“Whoa-ho-ho! Holy shit!” Ryuko crowed, leaning into it with a grin. “*That’s* Mako? That’s insane!”

“Oh. *My*,” Satsuki was equally impressed. “This is beyond anything I expected. And they’re actually aiming all those shots, I can’t believe it!”

Ryuko squinted, “Hmm, y’know I don’t think they are. Tonbo has to seek out a ship, and when he does he shoots for the back of the ship, the uh... y’know.”

“The stern?”

“Yeah, right, guess they’re blowing the rudders off. They get one clean shot off every second or so,” Ryuko narrated what she was seeing for Satsuki, who couldn’t see much through the rain. Ryuko could only tell which shots were aimed when they hit one of the enemy ships in the front row, but when it happened it was obvious. The bolts that hit the ocean dissipated with a dim glow, but the ones that struck metal flashed brilliantly just for a second, and then the ship shuddered to a stop, smoking. “So I think he’s just pumped up the storm with so much electricity that it’s just shooting off at random on its own!”

“Oh, I see! Fascinating,” She shaded her eyes to try to make out any details. What she could see, only barely, was a swarm of tiny purple and red lights blinking up towards Mako.

“Yeah, it makes me a little less worried that they might tire themselves out,” Ryuko agreed.

“It looks like REVOCS is going to try shutting her down,” Satsuki observed.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Ryuko said with a smirk as they watch Ira’s gigantic hands reach up through the swarms and clapping together with force to equal the thunder above.

“Indeed, she seems to be rather well protected.” They watched for a while longer as Ira waded forth through the battle and Mako drifted close behind, precisely striking down enemy ships. Still, there were hundreds of them, and enough were within range of the shore that artillery shells did occasionally strike ground. Mostly they missed, but even when they did the staggering power of modern cannonry shook the ground and sprayed pillars of mud and fire many stories into the air. The town was swiftly being reduced to rubble. And when they hit home...

Ryuko watched with full clarity when the nearest battery to her east got hit. The trucks, the munitions, they all blew apart instantly and for a second the little black silhouettes of men were visible against the fireball before they were swallowed. “... Holy shit,” Ryuko gulped. When the fire cleared, there were precious few of them left, all prone on the ground. There were some who were clearly alive, writhing in panic and pain. But only a couple.

“Screw this. I’m gonna help too.”

Satsuki looked at her in alarm, and Ryuko held up her hands defensively, “No, don’t worry, I’m not moving from this spot. But I ain’t gonna let that happen again!”

“What’s your plan,” Satsuki asked, wholly serious now.

“Well, if a machine can project a barrier of life-fibers, I think I can too, right?” And so saying she lifted her hand, releasing a lattice of life-fibers before. It mushroomed out, taking on a circular shape suspended before her as though a woven parasol was growing from her fingers. Through the lacy holes in it the battle beyond was still visible. “See? It’s possible! And now I just need to make it bigger!”

With but a thought, a suggestion, she released still more of herself into the growing shield. In shuddering surges, it doubled in diameter, then doubled again, and again and again it craned out. Ryuko grinned, flush with triumph as she watched delicate patterns form. Curved and supple like the ones on her “Kisaragi Wings”, they wrapped concentric around the central point – though as she kept expanding her shield Ryuko allowed it to cut off where it reached the water at the base of the sea-wall. She turned to Satsuki and grinned further when she saw her approval in a calm, determined smile.

“Alright! Let’s go even further with it!” Ryuko shouted, and the shield shot through with luminous pulse and at once ballooned as far as Ryuko dared imagine it would go. It spanned the entire shorefront of the town, and out into the woods beyond until the trees, the seawall, and her shield met in the peripherals of Ryuko’s vision. All told it was more than five miles across – not nearly as big as the dome that had covered the REVOCS fleet across miles and miles of sea, but a circular shield extending two-and-a-half miles into the sky was quite a different matter.

Ryuko hadn’t actually thought at all about what that would look like, but she felt the cold on this new extremity of hers and she realized that it rocketed up quite far into the sky. She saw Satsuki look up, heard the breath catch in her throat, and when she looked up herself she had the same reaction.

Half a mile into the air is about the upper limit of what is possible for skyscrapers. Honnouji Academy, built as a massive pyramid with a myriad of substructures within to ensure its stability, stretched past that and nearly made it to two miles. And that was high enough that on

rainy days the school itself was lost in the low-hanging clouds, shrouded in fog like a man-made mountain. Had Ryuko been capable of such a feat when it was still standing, she could have overshadowed the entire school by another half mile on top of already lofty height. And now when she looked up she saw, like a burning red wall marking the edge of the world itself, her barrier racing up to and through the clouds above. The battle on the other side might as well have been a projection, mounted on top of it, because there was simply no way over it or around.

Ryuko felt something drop in her gut. *I knew that I'd grown since I used my powers last, nine months of absorbing life-fibers every day will do that to you. But this...* "I... uh... y'know..." It felt like the first time she'd moved with Senketsu's power, the uncontrollable intensity of it! *But this, it feels kind of... good. Letting some of my power out like this, I didn't realize how much it was building up inside of me. And if she was capable of this, How much further can I go now?*

"Ryuko..." Satsuki was rather overawed too, and that took a lot.

Ryuko managed a sheepish smile – a reaction that actually surprised Satsuki, and it showed. *God, I am so addicted to you,* She'd been thinking with some alarm, *Every time you're pushed to it, you show me I had no idea the depths to which your power can run. And not just you, what Mako did today should not have been possible. If it weren't for you, I would never accept that.* It was a bit chilling how it reminded her of her first battle wearing Junketsu, when she'd first felt the exhilaration of being something more than human, when she'd tensed fingers coursing with a power a million battleships could never match and thought, *"This is a power that can conquer the world."* But then Ryuko looked just so disarmingly adorable, a stammering mixture of pride and embarrassment and wonderment at her own power. *You. You have no idea what you're capable of either. Nozomi will have so many moments just like this.* Satsuki laughed to herself as she realized, *We're all fumbling through the dark together.*

*\*Puff! \*\*Puff!\** High above their heads, two huge explosions looked like mere firecrackers. "Uh... Well... It works!" Ryuko eventually declared, and that snapped Satsuki back to the moment.

"Yes, indeed it does. Great work, Ryuko," Satsuki laid a hand on her shoulder and they watched as a constellation of scattered explosions began appearing across the shield, bright balls of light intercepted in air. "That pattern, did you design it yourself?"

"No, not really," Ryuko shrugged, "It's just kinda there already. I think maybe it's like a fingerprint, though maybe I could change it too, I don't know."

"It's beautiful as is, dear. Though, rather similar to 'The Eye' that you've manifested before," Satsuki commented, "And if I wasn't used to that I think I might find it-,"

"Fuckin' intimidating? Yeah, I can see that. Not exactly a bad thing though, it's like I'm saying to REVOCS, 'HERE I AM, COME AND GET ME!'," And overcome with a euphoric sense of her power Ryuko did yell that last part.

She wasn't wrong either. Seeing the horizon before them swallowed by Ryuko's shield, an infernal wheel with spokes extending into the heavens, staring at them with what could only be described as overwhelming intensity, was too much for the beleaguered warrior-cultists. Ryuko had come after all. And with the very weather turned against them, kamui rampaging through their ranks with impunity, and a stone colossus bearing down on them like something from an ancient myth, they began to panic. The swarms of flying troopers broke their unified formations and

scattered, the crews on the ships ran amok. In only a few minutes Ryuko's shield ceased to have any practical purpose; there was nobody left crewing the guns. But Ryuko and Satsuki would later learn from the others of the ignominious end of the REVOCS fighting force. For now they just watched, satisfied with the cover they had provided for their own side onshore.

"By the way, don't think I didn't notice that terrible pun earlier," Ryuko said.

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"You know, I said it was unbelievable how they killed those guys using lightning, and you said, 'It is *striking*, isn't it?'" Ryuko rolled her eyes, certain she was falling into Satsuki's joke.

But instead Satsuki's face lit up, and she put a hand over her mouth and laughed abruptly, "Oh! I said that? I had no idea!"

Ryuko broke into laughter too, "What? Are you kidding me Sats? There is no goddamn way!"

"I'm serious! You know my wit doesn't work that way! Really, it's quite embarrassing," She said, though she was in fact still giggling at herself.

"Nah, nah, it's just me here right now, so no big deal."

But Satsuki shook her head, "But that's just the thing, who's opinion matters more?" Ryuko gave her an '*oh please*' look, and Satsuki said, "Well, I'd *like* to look dignified in front of you, when possible." Ryuko smiled at her and said nothing, and Satsuki asked, "What?"

"Nothin'. That's cute," Ryuko said, and in response Satsuki put an arm around hers shoulder and pulled herself close. She pressed her lips into Ryuko's hair as she watched the last of the artillery shells collide with Ryuko's barrier. With her so close, Ryuko felt relieved of all her apprehensions about today.

But Satsuki couldn't stay, and after a moment she asked Ryuko, "You don't suppose you could let me pass, do you? I still have to bring back the rest of the sailors Mako rescued."

"Huh? Oh shit, right?" Ryuko turned to her barrier for a moment of concentration. The lacey threads parted as one of the tiny holes in the weave expanded into a circular opening just large enough to lift a car. "There, no problem! In fact give me that tablet back," Ryuko held a hand out and Satsuki passed it over, "When this says a crew is ready to shoot, I'll open up a hole for their shots to go through! You hear that?" She called into her earpiece, "I know it's crazy but we ain't done yet! Get back to work!"

As Satsuki flew back out into the storm, she saw behind her more tiny swiss-cheese holes open in the barrier and the flaming trails of rockets and bombs sailing through. Its light refracted through the rain, pervading the air in a glow as though the sun was breaking through the clouds.

~~~~~

**"MAKO! WHERE ARE YOU! MAKO!"**

Ira's voice boomed with a brassy echo. He held a hand up to his mouth, a hand so gigantic it would have overflowed a football field, made of polished grey stone with jointed fingers and deep grooves for its fingerprints. His mouth, no less large, glowed from within and had no depth beyond the back of his tongue where a wall of glowing orange molten rock vibrated like a great bass drum with every word.

**“MAKO!”**

He stormed through the waves, complete ignoring the battleships around him in his haste. Though he was plenty destructive to them even without trying, as each time he lifted his leg the rising of his knee created a towering tidal wave, lifting nearby ships and sweeping their decks clean. Behind him, the water rushed to fill the massive canyon carved by his passage and it dragged ships with it, smashing them together in heaps of groaning metal that exploded from within, engines fatally compromised.

**“MAKO! WHERE ARE-,”** Ira was cut off from calling out again as the sea before him bulged and foamed. A REVOCS life-fiber mecha, squat and crablike with a pair of curved, scything swords mounted to its arms. Like the Honnouji defcon machine – the prototype for all later models – it had long limbs with dozens of interlocking joints, a rotund armored body with no real neck, and an engine powered by the life force of hapless human prisoners inside. The whitecaps rolled off its shiny brows as it reached its full height, only a head or so shorter than Ira, and a foghorn bellowed out its challenge.

~ *“Gamagoori! We meet again!”* ~ It's pilots voice piped shrill and furious from a megaphone. ~ *“We will avenge our defeat at Seoul!”* ~ He crowed as behind Ira two more of the same mecha model rose from the sea, surrounding him.

Ira's brows furrowed, bemused, and he released a deep volcanic growl like a massive engine idling. **“WHAT?”** He shouted, and kept on walking, **“OUT OF MY WAY. I'M BUSY.”** He shoved right past the mecha and swatted it aside effortlessly, sending it smashing into the sea in a thunderous fountain. He bore on relentlessly towards the half-sunken *Namiwokiru*, where Tonbo's presence had been when those bolts of lightning hit. He was too worried to bear any mind to the mecha as they pursued him, and because they tried to avoid the ships in their way they couldn't catch up and even lost ground while he continued.

*How could they think this was okay? His thoughts and Tekketsu's were much the same, How could Ryuko let it happen? If anything happened to them...*

But he hadn't gotten to the *Namiwokiru* before he heard a familiar voice, “Ira!”

His head jerked up to the sky and when he saw the shiny blue and green glow of Tonbo's powered up form he stopped in his tracks, smiling broadly in relief. **“MAKO!”** She flew down before him – too close, actually, and floated there with a typically cheerful smile on her face. **“You're alright!”**

“Yup! Sorry, I didn't mean to give you a scare! I just, y'know, thought you were busy.”

**“I'm just glad you're alright,”** Ira said tenderly. His voice sank from the roaring volume of his shouting, but it remained so loud that the edges of Tonbo's sleeves and coattails vibrated violently. **“Only, do you think you could back up a bit?”**

“Eh? Why?”

**“I’m going cross-eyes trying to look at you. It’s like trying to see a fly!”** Mako, of course, hadn’t given much thought at all to how this would look from Ira’s perspective. She was right in the center of the beams emanating from his huge eyes. They were the eyes of a kamui – thin, yolky membranes over something molten inside, and she could see how the concentric rings of the iris, each a slightly different shade of orange or yellow, flowed and pressed together. But she’d processed them as something like headlights, part of a machine. Like Ira was sitting inside this facsimile of his head, using joysticks or a steering wheel or something to control it, or even like he was somewhere else operating it via remote control. But as she watched his pupils, which were tall enough that she could’ve stood inside one, try to get a focus on her she realized with a jump of her heart that this *was* his body.

She gulped, apologized quickly and pulled back. When she dithered about about how far to go, Ira lifted on of his huge hands and held it flat with his palm up. The rainwater pattered on it and ran in streams down the lines of his hands, dropping like little fountains into the ocean below. Mako said, “Oh!” and dropped down, and once she’d settled on his hand smiled up at Ira. Though it was a smile with a cocked head, and a mouth slightly ajar as she took in just how surreal Ira’s *Kyojin* form was. The way his chest rose and fell with a volcanic rumble, the way his armored skin shuddered, there was no doubt about it this was a living thing. It wasn’t a human, or even a normal life-fiber being, but it was *Ira*! When Mako could take in the whole of his face and upper chest she was struck by how *exactly* it was him, down to the weird curves at the end of his eyebrows and that dimple below his lower lip that made his chin stick out so prominently. It was kind of overwhelming.

**“What?”** Ira asked innocently.

“Oh nothing. I’m just kinda looking atcha,” Mako said, “I’ve never seen you do this from so close is all.”

**“O-oh,”** Ira stammered. He raised his other hand behind his head awkwardly and said, **“I guess it is a bit shocking.”**

**“Yeah,”** Mako giggled. She knew Ira wasn’t going to like what she had to tell him, but seeing him was a relief, nonetheless. Even like this. **“So, uh, you wanna know why I’m out here, don’t ya?”** She asked awkwardly.

**“I would, yes,”** Ira said, worried frown back on his face as he was reminded of what was going on here, **“I definitely would.”**

“Well, it’s only because when we were watching the battle I saw that ship blow up,” Mako pointed at the *Namiwokiru*, “Er, I mean we saw a lot of ships blow up, but that was when we thought ‘since we can fly, we gotta do something about this!’ So we flew out to try to save some of the sailors who fell into the ocean,” She looked down at her feet, “Only, we didn’t really manage to find all that many.”

**“Hm. Well then,”** Ira nodded in satisfaction – not only did that makes sense, but he and Tekketsu felt proud of them for it. **“You still saved lives, you should be proud. Only, you know that was very dangerous, don’t you?”** Mako nodded quietly, **“You could have been attacked!”** Mako didn’t say anything, and Ira said, **“... You got attacked didn’t you?”**

Mako didn’t know quite what to say, Tonbo had spent the whole flight over trying to think of how best to explain things to Ira, but he ended up with no guidance to offer. “Oh man,” She said sadly, looking at her feet.

**“What’s wrong?”**

“I... I...” She choked on the words. She was so scared to say it, scared of what Ira would think of her, scared to hurt him. But she wasn’t sorry either! They were evil, and she had no choice! She thought it would only be right if she could get some tears together, but instead all she felt was obstinance. One way or another she had to do it, and if Ira had a problem with that well then he should have been there! “I... I killed them!” Ira’s eyes went wide and Mako carried on quickly, “The first one I tried to pick him outta the water and he stabbed me and I dropped him by accident, then we had to fight a bunch of weaker guys but I tried just knock them around with my bat or take their uniforms off so I don’t even *know*, and then there were these two admiral guys and they were really tough so I had no choice! I had to kill them!” She finished it off with a shout and under the inscrutable gaze of those giant molten eyes her sense of shame was magnified. “You should’ve heard what they said they were gonna do to Ryuko, okay? So it’s not my fault!” She pressed on, growing shrill with indignance, “It’s not my fault!”

Ira’s voice was like the rumble of an earthquake. **“... They STABBED YOU!”** He was furious, but not at Mako.

*[Maybe we didn’t really think about the situation the right way.]*

“Well, yeah,” Mako mumbled, holding up her hurt arm, “But it’s just a flesh wound on my arm, see? Satsuki looked at it and everything!”

Ira squinted, straining to see something so small, and he lifted her up closer to his eye. She shuddered, so close to him she could basically feel Tekketsu’s aura herself in the radiant heat.

**“Does it hurt?”**

Mako blew out a big sigh, “Yeah. But there’s been so much going on, so like, I haven’t really noticed.”

Ira lifted his other hand and made to pat Mako on the head, but then realized there was no way that wouldn’t terrify her. He considered lowering his head to kiss her, but no that wouldn’t work either. So he settled for lifting his thumb and folding it towards the center of his palm to try and press it against her – even that made Mako flinch but it was the best he could do. **“I’m sorry you had to go through that, Mako,”** He said, making his voice as gentle as possible.

“You’re... not mad?” Mako was stunned.

**“Mad? No, why would I be?”**

“Just cuz, you said before Tonbo that you didn’t want me to be murderer. And now here I am and...” She trailed off sadly.

**“You thought that meant I was going to be mad?”** Ira said with surprise, **“No, no not at all. I never meant it like that, I meant that I wanted to spare *you* from it! I didn’t want you to know what it was like.”**

“Yeah but, you said that if I had a kamui something like this was bound to happen. And now look! If it weren’t for Tonbo I couldn’t have even gotten into that situation!” Mako protested. She knew that for Tonbo and herself, that trade was worth it every time, and it probably was for Ira and Tekketsu too. But, “Isn’t this exactly what you said would happen?”

**“No. Well, uh, maybe. But you got into that situation by trying to save people, didn’t you? You would have wanted to do that, even if you couldn’t. Kamui, they really don’t make you do things you don’t want, you know. They only let you do what you wanted to do all along, but couldn’t,”** Ira said, **“I know you wouldn’t have killed them if it weren’t the only way to make sure they didn’t kill you, or those sailors. That’s self-defense, and there’s no reason to feel ashamed of that.”**

Mako began to cry, at once overwhelmed by relief and also still bearing more than a little shame. “Yeah but... I just thought that you’d say, ‘Mako? She couldn’t really *kill* someone!’ Like, that’s not something that should ever happen!”

Ira intuited the full extent of what she meant by that. **“Mako, look at me. This is important, okay?”** When she did, he went on, **“I love you. This will never change that. I know how it feels though, I’ve been there. Killing someone, even if it’s someone evil or for a cause you believe in, is so terrible that if you have a heart at all you’ll never believe for sure that you’re a good person again. That’s what it feels like, isn’t it? But you are, both of you, I know for sure that you are.”**

Mako sniffled and wiped her eyes. A good person? They hadn’t even thought of it that way, in fact they knew for sure the admirals had been evil. But hearing him say ‘I love you’, just like that, it wasn’t fair that he could say that at a time like this. And it was doubly shocking too, because when Tonbo heard it he could have sworn that in rumbling echo of Ira’s voice he heard Tekketsu’s speaking along with him.

“Iraaaaaa!” She pounded on his thumb, with enough of Tonbo’s strength to make it shudder a little. It was ineffectual, and Mako didn’t know what exactly she was trying to express, but it did make Ira smile.

**“So?”** He asked after she’d fully dried her tears. **“How do you feel?”**

“I... don’t know,” Mako said, “I was scared about what *you’d* think. But now, I don’t know. It’s sad; they’ll never feel the sun again, or have dinner with their family, or pet a puppy. But they weren’t doing any of these things anyway! I mean, these were evil dudes!”

Ira nodded understandingly, **“They were as good as dead already. There are a lot in REVOCS who are like that. And it is hard to tell them from the ones who could be saved. But... you should never think that I would be upset with you for that. Everyone we *know* has killed people, and I still love them!”** *And it’s nothing compared to what Ryuko and Satsuki have done*, he thought sardonically.

“Yeah, I don’t know what – IRA! Behind you!” Mako shouted, as the leader of the squad of mechas had at last caught up with them, and was leaping towards Ira’s hunched back, sea foam rising with it, huge claw-like sickles poised to stab with tremendous force.

But thunder crashed and roared overhead and lightning bolt ripped from the sky, while Ira was still turning in surprise. It smashed right down onto the mecha’s domed head, sending it reeling backwards. **“WHOA!”** Ira wheeled around quickly and Mako leapt off his hand into the air. While his enemy was still regaining its footing on the slippery seafloor, Ira moved with impossible swiftness. He grabbed both its arm at the shoulders and yanked, ripping them off in a single huge motion. He planted his foot on its chassis and kicked it as hard as he could, dropping it right on top of a battleship which cracked and exploded. Amidst the fire and towering waves, there was no way



the mecha could right itself without its arms and so it could only sit there. **“I SAID I WAS BUSY!”** Ira roared.

~ *“You BASTARD!”* ~ The pilot raged back, and so Ira reached down and carefully wrenched the megaphone right off the mecha’s head, silencing it.

**“SIT THERE AND THINK ABOUT IT!”** Ira turned back to Mako. **“See? I do things like that, so how could I ever be mad at you for killing a just a few of REVOCS’ worst? Lucky thing that lightning struck him though. Er, you should probably go now. Looks like the rest is.”**

Mako was watching in awe, mouth hanging open and hands balled into little fists that she pumped in excitement, “Ohh! That was. So. Cool!”

**“Thank you!”** Ira called, and when Mako kept floating there he thought she must not have heard him over the storm and said, **“YOU SHOULD GO!”**

“Huh? But I wanna help! We make a good team don’t we?”

The other two mecha were still bearing down, but after seeing their leader so thoroughly dismantled they thought twice and were hesitating. **“I can watch my own back, most of the time,”** Ira said confidently, **“But thanks!”**

*Oh, right!* “No, we made the lightning! Tonbo can control the weather now!”

Ira’s reaction wasn’t shocked, just confused. He tilted his head and said, **“What – no you can’t.”**

“Yu-huh!” Mako obstinately shot back. She hadn’t considered how insane that would sound if someone didn’t see it the first time. “Watch, I’ll zap that ship!” She pointed at a nearby ship that was floating idly and waiting for space to clear up in the tight formation so it could advance. Its crew had long since realized that shooting Ira with guns was just wasting ammo, so for the moment it was effectively at rest only a couple hundred yards from Ira’s huge legs. As soon as he and Mako agreed through a nonverbal impulse, Tonbo seized the air currents and pulled down.

Neither he nor Mako had any real idea what was inside a battleship, but they had correctly figured out that the things that made it go were at the rear, so they struck there. The bolt struck home, another blinding white pillar huge and instant, and Ira got to watch its progress firsthand. For a split second the lightning-rod did it’s job, and an arcing bolt like a precursor was sucked towards the ship’s highest tower. But then the rob popped off like a toy, the raw force overwhelming it, and the lightning realigned and scorched the rear side of the ship, punching a huge hole that rocked the entire ship. The ship began taking on water, and with a despondent chain of bubbles the propeller and rudders ground to a halt, their internals mechanics irreparably damaged.

*[Nice! I think I’m getting better at this!]* Tonbo said.

“Good shot Tonbo!” Mako said, observing Ira with a giggle. As he often did, he was trying to stay stoic. But she could tell that was a major shock. He was clearly recalculating just how much danger he thought Mako had been in.

She watched smugly as he slowly turned to her and said, **“... I see.”**

“Yeah, you see!” Mako laughed. Ira held out his hand again, a signal that he wanted Mako to land and talk closer again.

**“So. Uh. You’ve gotten stronger,”** He said awkwardly.

“Yup!” Was Mako’s proud response.

**“Is this how you defeated the REVOCS admirals?”**

“Had to! They were tough! Teachin’ me to fight real guys was never gonna work. You tried though!” Mako said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Pretty neat, right?”

**“It’s more than neat, it’s like magic!”** Ira exclaimed enthusiastically. **“Tonbo, you realize this probably makes you the most powerful of all of us?”** Again, those words came out in Ira’s voice, *mostly*. But Tonbo was even more sure that Tekketsu’s voice was in there too, in the echoes. **“Well, of course besides Mo – Ryuko.”**

Okay that made him sure, and he asked, *[Wait a moment. Which of you are we talking to here? Tekketsu?]*

And if it had been Ira alone speaking to them, he wouldn’t have been able to hear that. But he raised his eyebrows, frowned an intrigued little frown, and scratched his cheek with a mountainous finger. He (they) hadn’t thought about it at all. **“Oh. I think... both? Yeah, both.”**

“Both? Wha-but- Okay now *that* is like magic!”

**“Well, it’s strange,”** They said awkwardly, **“And I’m sure the science crew would be fascinated by that, but we hadn’t even noticed.”**

“Ah c’mon! And come one with this whole ‘you’re the strongest’ thing. You just ripped the arms off a huge robot like it was made of tinfoil!”

**“Sure, but,”** They stopped, thought about it, and then Ira smiled and said, **“Alright, it is pretty cool, isn’t it?”**

“Cool? You’re a giant, living statue with gold hair!” Mako laugh, “What do you think?”

**“I think I’m still not fully used to it. You know I’m used to being tall, but there’s being tall and then there’s *this*. I mean, talk about being the center of attention! With how all the little guys swarm me, I think I’m seriously more use as a distraction than a fighter.”**

Mako knew that was all affected modesty, **“Nah, you like that everyone is seeing all your huge statue muscles.”**

**“Well, I-,”**

*“I know that you’re a big showoff, really!”*

**“That’s rude,”** They declared.

Mako protested, **“No, it’s not! ‘Cause I like it too, y’know.”**

Neither Ira nor Tekketsu really knew what to say to that. If their stone skin was capable of blushing, they would have.

Mako didn’t feel the need to elaborate further either. “Can I touch your hair?” She asked loudly.

Ira was taken aback, **“My hair? You want to touch my hair? Why?”**

“ ‘Cause it seriously looks like it’s made out of gold, that’s why! Did you – did you really not know that?” From the look on Ira’s face Mako could tell this was a surprise.

**“No! I mean, we watched it on the news after the first time, but I’ve never looked at myself in this form, not really!”**

“Well then lemme touch *it!*” Mako whined, and Ira relented. He lifted his hand to his forehead, pressing his palm right up to his hairline. Ira’s typical well-combed hairline belied the fact that his hair was actually quite long, and now Mako grabbed hold of a handful of tensile wires that were just pure gold as she thought and longer than she was tall. She marveled at how unnatural it was, at the silky smooth, soft feeling of the surface despite how rigid each hair was – they were clearly determined to mimic Ira’s typical hairstyle no matter what happened. “Oooh!”

**“Well? How is it?”** Ira asked with more than a little consternation.

“It’s gold alright! Like, real gold! It’s *so* pretty! But it’s got a weird kinda stiffness too, it’s like... oh! It reminds me of uncooked spaghetti!” Ira’s body shook as he chuckled lightly. That led to inspiration from Mako, “When this is all done and over, we should celebrate with a big spaghetti dinner, wouldn’t that be nice?” She kept on tugging at her bunch of “hairs”, wiggling them around. Then she scrunched up her face and said, “Ew, your scalp is all weird though! It’s like, got all these weird wrinkles and bumps.”

**“Hey I didn’t ask you to do this, you know!”** Ira said indignantly, and Mako just laughed at that. When she let go, Ira brought her down to a normal level and they stood there for a moment, at peace with how things had turned out. Neither wanted to say it, but it felt like all that talk of death and killing was long in the past. **“So... you wanted to help?”**

“Mhm!” Mako nodded vigorously, “You see what we did to that ship? We can do it to all of ‘em, just the same! And without killin’ anyone either, I just stop the ship from moving and then what? If they can’t get to shore then the fight’s over, right?”

**“Right! Then I’ll keep REVOCS off your back while you do that!”** Ira declared, and without wasting a moment more Mako leapt off his hand and zoomed up, high enough that the entire sweep of the battle was once again visible to her. She’d heard the others say that with a kamui, the world was your playground, and now she felt like she understood what they meant. Deadly bullets flew everywhere, swords and claws and guns flashed in the light of explosions, but none of it bothered her at all. She was safe high in the sky with Ira to protect her. And now, though it sounded crazy, she and Tonbo would get a chance to be the heroes of the whole day! Maybe they couldn’t kill the enemy kamui, but who cared about that?

“You know, I know I shouldn’t but I’m having fun right now!” She said to Tonbo. “Like, before was bad but now I feel like, I don’t know, it’s an adventure! An adventure’s got to start bad at first, otherwise the end is no good.”

*[You think I didn’t notice? The moment Ira told you it was all okay, I could feel the tension leave your body.]*

“Oh yeah?” Mako giggled, “Well yeah, ‘course! ‘Cause he’s my fiancé, so it’s only normal that he’d – wait, shoot!” She suddenly turned a full one-eighty and dove back down. “Ira!”

**“Huh? What’s wrong?”**

“I’ve still got my ring on, see?” She held up her hand. There was literally no way Ira could make out something so small, but he squinted and tried. And he believed her anyway. “I just thought you might’ve been scared I’d lose it, when I was fighting and all!”

Ira grinned, **“I wasn’t scared. I knew you’d hold onto it no matter what.”**

The story of how Mako and her Kamui Tonbo won The Great REVOCS Battle (there really wasn’t another fitting title) grew in the telling. But not that much. Later, secondhand interpretations of the conversation between them and Ira were much more poetic and fraught, for one thing. But be it on the news or in the reverential tales of veterans or much later in genuine poetic sagas, they didn’t know Mako, and they certainly didn’t know their kamui. To them, the “Cloud Princess” – this was her counterpart to how people called Mataro the “Young Prince” – was a distant ideal, not a girl with her head *in* the clouds.

They saw her as a tiny figure of a woman, wreathed in Tonbo’s vibrant green and blue lights in a way that made her seem serene, more than human. Nobody but them, Ira, and Tekketsu could possibly hear the exuberant chatter she kept up the whole time. The way that she coached Tonbo, encouraged him, praised him each time another bolt fell. Or the offhand remarks and observations she reserved for Ira – everything about the battle seemed amazing now and she needed to make sure he saw it all. And when people who did know her heard these secondhand accounts, they had to confess it was a shame. It could’ve been anyone in her place, without those key details.

But then, that was hardly a problem exclusive to Mako alone.

What didn’t need to grow at all was the calamitous power of the storm her Kamui Tonbo summoned. The way that it struck down each ship one by one, the way its gale force winds dragged down flying REVOCS troopers and caught them up, slamming them in heaps – mostly alive thanks to their uniforms but in a state of utter despair – onto their rain-drenched decks. That part was real enough in every version.

# Hostile Architecture: 1

## Chapter Summary

Why oh why do I make em so long? I get it in my head that things need some contextualizing and maybe they do, idk. The "connective tissue" for this one really only just came together in my head mostly because I felt like this needed buildup and then I have to go and actually write the buildup. I really can't say if it was all necessary but oh well I like it.

October 2068

~~~~~

At about the same time that Mako was flying out into the battle at sea, kamui Ranketsu was arriving at the Research Complex. Nonon, Houka, Shiro, Mataro, and Yuda awaited its arrival in silence. They had made their preparations, there was nothing left to say.

Night had fallen, but floodlights in their carefully arrayed hundreds lit the vast concrete plain; all that was left of the complex on the surface. In its center, a sole landmark existed in the form of the particle accelerator. It stood about ten stories high, a wide loop of white heat-resistant ceramic and shiny metal mounted vertically on a short platform, with rows of blue and green lights flickering along its sides to indicate that it was active. A giant net, waving in the air to capture something much, much larger than a butterfly. It emitted a pulsating hum and occasionally an electrical sparking, signs that within its wide chambers clustered atoms of immense density were being hurled around and around. The air at the center of the ring was already beginning to warp from the force of it, distorted like a thin, misty mirage. It was ready.

But how to get Ranketsu to pass through the center and become trapped? Houka proposed a simple strategy: fight it and throw it in. It did not come alone though, a squad of REVOCS' most elite warriors accompanied it. It wasn't clear exactly what their plan was when they arrived. Would they split off to infiltrate the base and steal the plans for the kamui construction chamber while Ranketsu acted as a distraction? Would they join Ranketsu in a headfirst fight knowing they would have all the time in the world once if the opposition was dead? The solution to them was simple too. They couldn't do anything if you fought them and killed them before they had a chance.

So, all were in their places. Nonon stood in the middle of the flat grey battlefield at attention. She held her naginata *Kiba* like a baton, straight at her side, and Saiban had already assumed his most versatile combat form – his flight form with its narrow-forked shoulder-spines and wide fantail. His headphones were already grown around her ears, ready to drive her forth with a combat rhythm and seemed totally unconcerned with the battle at hand, even eager to get into the fray. On the one hand she had every right to, Saiban had absorbed Rosuketsu and that made her raw power by far the greatest, maybe even enough to beat Ranketsu on her own (if it didn't back off once its host was nearing death, as usual). But on the other hand that only meant she was placed so that Ranketsu, in its brute rampage, would almost definitely target her first.

Yuda was on her right, all nerves and agitation, a grim look on his face. He would back her up, and together they would bear the brunt of Ranketsu's assault. Kamui Rama's eyes, which usually looked quite like they were peeking over his shoulders on their fan-shaped armored plates, looked like they were trying to hide behind him, brows furrowed with concentration and worry. She was determined to stick besides Saiban and to be useful, not in the way – she greatly admired him. And Yuda shared that determination; bodyguarding was his work, and he felt much better with a teammate than fighting alone.

Meanwhile, perched on the control platform at the base of particle accelerator, Houka and Shiro stood like sentinels. Their job was to skirt around the central duel with Ranketsu, cut down the REVOCS cultists, then turn to join and together overwhelm the enemy kamui. Houka's razor-thin sabres hung at his sides like extensions of his already lanky arms, and combined with the smooth pearly surface of Misaki's spherical shoulder pads he reflected the accelerator's light and seemed to glow himself. Even his hair whipped back and forth in the pulses of energy it produced like a wisp of blue fire. He was deftly balanced on the guardrail, rocking back and forth sightly on the balls of his feet as though he weighed nothing at all.

Shiro on the other hand was deep in thought. He was leaning on the rail on the other side, staring at nothing. Through his connection with Izanami, he was watching the battle at sea with great interest; he needed to know for himself just what they were in for. Her eyes, mounted on the eight tendrilous ends of her cape, waved about the in air behind him. Just below each, at the end of the "tentacle", a dexterous claw grabbed a diamond-shaped hardened life-fiber knife like a kunai, though with a shorter hilt better made for the claw than a hand. He had latched another set around his waist and yet more to his ankles, which tapped impatiently on the metal deck.

Oh, and Mataro was somewhere too. Thanks to Wakaiketsu's ability to hide her presence, none of them knew quite where. Even on this bare plain, he had found a shadow and vanished as if it were a cramped blind alley. But he was sure to appear suddenly whenever it would be most useful to have him spring out from the shadows.

Ranketsu grew near. Every kamui darted their eyes towards it, all their wearers turned their heads to the sky. Like a meteor it descended, wreathed in the glow of its own afterburn. They spotted the burning blue comet crest the horizon and watched in stark silence as it traced across the sky, the thinner red and purple lights of flying Ultima Uniforms in a wide wedge behind it, seeming to struggle to keep up. It was a moment of utter still as Ranketsu reached the zenith of its arc, then it began to grow larger, seeming to hold still.

And then the shockwave force of the Kamuis' clashing auras' struck, flat claps of white pressurized air appearing abruptly in the air. Everyone's hair and every free tassel or filament on the kamui whipped madly at impossible speeds as the wind ripped past them.

"Hi-YA!" Nonon wasted no time, and the moment Ranketsu was in range she flitted up into the air and charged right at Ranketsu. She held *Kiba* forward, wrapping her arm around it like a knight's lance. High up above, plunging down nearly vertically, Ranketsu did the same. Its spear was not quite as long as *Kiba*, but it had a narrow blade nearly two feet long and Ranketsu angled it right for Nonon's head with a stern look of murderous intention in both kamui and host's eyes. In the midair joust it seemed certain that both would eviscerate each other, but at the last instant Nonon changed the heading of her blade just slightly. With a glancing collision, it deflected Ranketsu's spear and they sailed past each other, and once Nonon was just behind Ranketsu she swung with all her might, slapping with the flat side of *Kiba's* blade square on the back of her head. For a brief moment, Ranketsu seemed to resist, and they froze in the air, crackling with

power. But Nonon won out, and as she followed through on that tremendous swing Ranketsu plunged to earth.

*\*Whoom!\** The ground shoot and a cloud of dust and rubble blossomed out before Yuda. The concrete tiles shook and rocked, ripples in a pond, but they didn't break. And Yuda could see a silvery flash amidst the dust.

"The spear!" He shouted, mostly for Rama's benefit, "I've got it!" And he rushed into the fray confidently.

Ranketsu. By raw power, it was definitely a rank above the other enemy kamui, and that beamed through it. Its host was an Indian woman, from the REVOCS branch in that country and the product of an intensive breeding program to yield an ideal Kamui host. She was tall, towering over Nonon and even slightly taller than Yuda, and voluptuous too. It was almost as if she were purpose built to imitate the Amazonian stature of Ragyo herself. Her skin was dark and smooth, her face regal -beautiful if it weren't always shadowed by inhuman fury - and her eyes wide and alert. And the kamui itself was no less grand and beautiful. Its shoulderplates were huge spike-shaped pauldrons, much like those of Junketsu, only in a deep blue that shone like sapphire. Below, only thin luminescent lines of white and blue traced up and down the length of its host's body, leaving her looking nearly nude from the front. But it did have sleeves and a massive cloak, made from a material as dark and blue and silky as its pauldrons. The sleeves were slit open in the front but they draped long behind her, and as she moved they shimmered and flowed like water. The depths of the ocean, the depths of space; where Rosuketsu with its gripping, emaciated bodice had been a creature of blood and death, and the twins Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu were tiny and delicate as if to form a mocking contrast with their invincibility, Ranketsu was a creature of the depths humans were not meant to glimpse.

But Yuda charged it anyway, his sole thought being to hook a hardened life-fiber karambit around he spear and wrench it from her hands. And he succeeded, even though to his surprise Ranketsu had landed already standing. Around the haft of the spear the curved blade of the karambit knife caught, and he swung for her head with his other hand in a fist to try and knock the two of them away. But just as quickly, he spotted something flash in her backhand and instinctively pulled back, tilting his head away with a grimace and kicking off the ground.

Good instincts, because he narrowly evaded a swipe from a dagger that suddenly appeared from the depths of her sleeve. *[Whew! That was lucky!]* Rama gasped. But the ride wasn't over yet, and Ranketsu whipped the spear back, trying to pull Yuda in and stab him. With both his feet off the ground however he beat it back with a flurry of kicks, precise hits to the elbow that prevented it from ever fully raising the dagger.

He might have gone on in that stalemate forever if Nonon hadn't dropped down next to them. She landed with a dainty foot extended and was smirking in the most smug and self-assured way possible. No question, she was stronger, faster, and better than Ranketsu and would have beheaded it in that initial clash if she wasn't explicitly told not to.

"You sure I can't just kill her?" Nonon called to Houka.

"I'd really appreciate it if you didn't!" He shouted back.

"Hmph! Well don't make me regret it! We've got this, you take care of those guys!" She pointed up to the REVOCS troopers, who were diving down as fast as they could. They were silhouetted against the floodlights and just barely visible as anything other than tiny dots, but that

was close enough. The moment they entered the perimeter of the lab, a huge mechanical \*CLUNK\* sounded from all around as the edges of the arena began to rise. Hundreds of glowing red emitters surrounded it in every direction, and from their metal recesses a hissing noise presaged the release of a thick red mist of life-fibers. It billowed out and then snapped to, forming a band of red encircling the concrete arena that continued to grow steadily in height. A life-fiber barrier, only not made to keep anything out, but instead keep the attackers in.

“And our trap is sprung!” Houka proudly declared. That was directly at Shiro, Nonon wasn’t listening anymore. She dove into the fray, skirting around looking for her opening. Ranketsu turned, trying to put Yuda between itself and Nonon, and Nonon suddenly pivoted and took a huge swing towards its left shoulder. It held the dagger in its left hand, and it lifted it to block Nonon. Maybe a human warrior would have seen that that was a bad move, because in the single moment that Yuda didn’t have to block stabs from the dagger he let go with his karambit and caught the spear with his ankles, one above and one below. With a powerful twist he spun his entire body horizontally in the air, and wrenched the spear right out of Ranketsu’s grasp. It flew in a smooth arc and landed almost one hundred yards away, half the spearhead imbedded in the ground. It vibrated from the force of the landing, but Yuda landed on his feet in a low crouch. With a frustrated growl, Ranketsu lashed out at him, and another dagger appeared from her right sleeve as well.

But just having two weapons did not make Ranketsu a fair match for two opponents. *[Nice work! Keep the pressure on!]* Saiban shouted from both himself and Nonon.

*[Yes sir!]* Rama replied, and Yuda leapt up and back into the action. Working together, it was easier than sparring. Nonon already had plenty of experience fighting Rosuketsu. she understood the alien way of fighting typical to a REVOCS kamui, with its sudden, jerky motions – stiff like a soldier on parade one minute, fluid and nimble the next. Rama struggled to keep up in power and Ranketsu’s move seemed shockingly fast and strong. Even though Yuda was used to tangling with REVOCS warriors who were stronger than him, this was something else. When he was forced to block, he had to act on pure instinct to infer when the strike would come, and his arms nearly bucked each time But he didn’t need to worry, he’d trained with Nonon plenty, and while he kept his eyes on Ranketsu Rama watched her. And all he had to do was spot an opening in Nonon’s defenses and fill it himself.

Fighting like this, Nonon was pushing Ranketsu back no problem. With Yuda covering her defenses it was all attack, all the time, leaning forward and springing off her toetips, spinning *Kiba* like a baton to strike again and again and again. In no time at all, she had corralled Ranketsu and was guiding it towards the particle accelerator. The whole pattern was clear to Nonon, she’d even decided the very moment when she would drop *Kiba*, seize Ranketsu with both hands, and hurl her into the distortion in the middle. The battle-music that Saiban composed was bombastic, triumphant, and adrenaline powered fury. Ranketsu’s host wore a hideous, animalistic snarl.

But if there was something in the back of her mind saying it was all too easy, that little voice was about to be satisfied. It was as if all at once Ranketsu decided it had enough. It surged forward on the attack, and Nonon’s eyes went wide as she saw that those sleeves were expanding, splitting and peeling apart like flowers. They were glowing inside.

“Oh shit! Lasers!” Nonon shouted, which was enough for Yuda to know what to do. And just about as much warning as they were going to get. They both sprung back, knowing that even a kamui couldn’t dodge an attack at the speed of light. The only thing to do was make sure those blooming flowers weren’t facing them when they fired. But try as they might, they just didn’t



have time to pull any tricks that might shake Ranketsu's unerring aim. But as Nonon and Yuda both clenched their eyes and braced for impact – \*VRRRR-THUNK!\* The floor panels between them and Ranketsu suddenly rose and tilted, creating a tall, solid wall of concrete cover nearly as thick as Nonon was tall, propped up by dozens of metal limbs that held it suspended over the void below. "Whoa," Nonon stopped, and next to her Yuda froze too, as though making a sound would reveal where he was hiding. They heard the bassy boom of kamui lasers firing. And they saw as at two points the concrete began to glow orange with heat, starting as mere pinpricks but expanding into wide, ductile chunks of molten concrete. But they didn't break.

Because at that moment, on the other side Houka and Shiro had sprung into action. Ranketsu, shrieking with inhuman rage, kept firing constant streams of blue light toward the last point at which it had seen Nonon and Yuda, slowly boring through the concrete cover. It was beginning to glow, golden and white, flames licking along its silhouette. But then long, thin fingers tapped on its shoulder. "Excuse me," Houka said, and Ranketsu turned, registering surprise with a snarling curl to its lip. And the moment it presented a clean shot on its cheek, he uncurled the whole length of his body and kicked right there.

So what Nonon and Yuda saw was Ranketsu sailing overhead, to land in another dust explosion in the distance. And then the cover dropped and there stood Shiro, with Houka not far behind. "Situation's changed," Shiro declared, "We need to change tactics."

The fact that they'd just saved them aside, Nonon was still pissed. "Yeah, sure, but c'mon! Did you really have to do that? We were *right there!*" She yelled, waving Kiba about.

"She was about to destroy it! Take a look," Shiro pointed at Ranketsu. When the dust settled, Ranketsu didn't launch into another attack. It was just standing there, wreathed in light. And around that, a wide nimbus of sapping darkness, like a hole in the distant floodlights.

"Ohhh," Well, that did change things, "I've seen this before."

"All too right," Houka said, "*Cosmic Empowerment*. It's like what Ryuko can do for us, only it seems that in this case the life-fiber network is pumped as much power into Ranketsu as it can possibly take. The results will be... explosive."

"Rosuketsu attempted to pull the same move on you at Krakatoa, but you prevented it. The others couldn't stop Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu from activating Cosmic Empowerment in the battle at sea, just moments ago. So I can't say I'm surprised to see it here too," Shiro finished Houka's thought.

Yuda, still breathless from the fight, did not like the sound of that. "You mean that thing is about to get even stronger?"

"They're pulling out all the stops," Nonon observed, and as they stood braced against the unrelenting invisible pressure emitted by Ranketsu the lab began to prepare for impact. The concrete fell away, creating a huge circle with jagged edges as tile after tile peeled off. The one on which Ranketsu stood remained, like a lily pad bobbing over the abyss. Strange, flat panels mounted in rows on craning arms rose from the abyss, shiny like mirrors but traced through with thin lines and delicate patterns like solar panels. As one, each arm assumed its place, locking in at a corner where one of the square concrete panels had fallen away, and the panels unfurled. Steam hissed from the joints and wires glowed with the life-fiber luminescence of Izanami and Misaki's circuitry. Whatever they were constructing, and Nonon could only guess it was some kind of shield against what happened when Ranketsu was fully charged, they did it shockingly fast. Ranketsu

was encased in a loose sphere, with only thin cracks through which they could see all that latent energy building up until it finally burst.

Light spilled out from the cracks like a liquid. The noise of the roaring inferno was just as tremendous; the burst of energy was both blinding and deafening. Not that this phased any member of the kamui corps, but they could see with their own eyes what the kamui felt. The shield bubble creaked and protested, but it did its job and soaked up all that light and heat admirably. When the light faded though, it was as if the power from within was the only thing propping it all up. Scorched and sparking, twisted, half-melted, and deformed, it all came crumbling down just as soon as the life-fiber circuitry retracted. And amidst the smoldering wreckage, Ranketsu began floating down into the lab's subterranean recesses.

Right alongside it, diving at maximum speed, the REVOCS warriors finally arrived on the scene. Nonon got one glimpse at them – all wore three-star models, *Medjay*, *Praetorians*, and the *Varangian* model (the one the admirals Mako fought wore) which she'd only seen a few times on high-ranking commanders. She spotted hardened life-fiber weapons dyed royal purple, women's faces and physiques. It looked like they were the elite of the Couturière order, the first and most loyal of Ragyo's servants.

And they sped right past, diving down into the lab. "Wha – oh look at this now!" Nonon exclaimed indignantly, leaping into the air, "They don't care about us at all!"

She was about to dive after them when Houka yelled, "Go after the troopers! Leave Ranketsu to us!" Nonon would have protested, but he quickly cut her off, "This is our home turf, so to speak. We still have the advantage."

Nonon nodded, and waved to Yuda as she dove. "Come on!" She yelled, eager to get back into the fray, and he followed by bounding off the edge towards the cubic black outline of some subterranean building. He couldn't help but gulp as he sailed past Ranketsu. But when he saw that the Couturières were weaving their way down to the very bottom of the facility whereas it seemed more interested in recovering its spear – it had fallen just a couple layers down in the chaos of the explosion – he summoned his courage and pressed on.

The hollow interior of the research complex was like a starry sky, a huge planetarium made from concrete and metal. It was terrifyingly dark; even despite the countless constellations of signaling lights and circuit boards he couldn't see the edges or the bottom, it seemed to go on forever. The whole thing was a lattice of beams and struts, along which rooms and buildings slid and shifted on trackways according to some pattern Yuda couldn't guess at. The exteriors of the buildings were void, unlit, but inside their windows he could see labs, offices, and corridors illuminated with dim red emergency lights. Even now, above him Ranketsu was entering one he recognized by its curved driveway and wide doors, the largest single piece of this giant floating puzzle – the central headquarters. Below him there were others he didn't recognize.

He slid down the glass siding of one building, then kicked off, bouncing between the metal struts even as around him pieces shifted and rose and smaller boxes and crates tumbled through chutes, making pneumatic hissing noises as they passed by. Nonon was speeding ahead, without flight it was impossible to keep up. Down where she was headed, down in the deepest abyss of the place, something glowed a deep red. He could just make out something huge, almost pyramidal in shape, blocks of twinkling circuitry capped by a shiny crimson dome that pulsed in a pattern too fast for him to grab. Next to it, a tiny white circle – a well-lit room with an open ceiling. That he recognized, he'd been shown the room where Ryuko made the kamui before.

Rama was in awe. What Yuda could only infer (and almost didn't want to think about), she could feel. *[T-That's Izanami! That whole thing, that's her computer body!]* She realized, and relayed in a tone of shocked hush, as though if she were too loud it would see her. *[And look, over there, that's Misaki!]* On the opposite side of Ryuko's kamui chamber, just now coming into view behind a floating chunk of the lawn, another huge server complex built to the same design, but capped with a dome that glowed a vibrant blue.

"So that's what they always talking about," Yuda said with a chill. "I just thought they could order up stuff they needed using those tubes and access the lab computers without being – uh, actually at the computer, but it's more than that. They aren't just wired into the lab's systems. They *are* the lab!"

~~~~~

All was quiet and still in the Kinue Kinagase Research Complex's main lobby. The fountains were deactivated, and all along the many rows of balconies above the windows to all the offices and conference rooms were dark. Outside the main doors only blackness could be seen, and inside only the basic ceiling lights that dimly lit the main atrium were active. The only part of the room that was well lit was the statues in the center. Along the sides of the main atrium, gardens surrounded displays, dioramas, and prototypes from dozens of projects, and these were still lovingly illuminated at just the right angles to show their best qualities and make their colors pop. And in the center, the grand statue of Kinue still glinted under a circle of beaming stage lights. Her lab coat billowed around her feet, and her face was tilted up to the sky with a lofty, serene look of inspiration. "*Don't stop the Experiment*" the placard at her feet read. Her final words, and the lab's motto. All was as it normally would be on an ordinary weeknight. Only instead of a secretary who forgot her phone charger strolling in, it was Ranketsu, wreathed in golden flames, who stalked across a marble floor scuffed by thousands of daily visitors.

If it had any idea that the end result of that grand experiment was to make a new kind of life-fiber being, a species to overthrow and replace its kind, it didn't show it. It didn't see any need to outward express anything at all. Its face was a flat mask devoid of emotion, less expressive even than Kinue's statue.

The displays on the left side caught its attention. It started with the closest one first, a scale model of a new satellite designed and launched at the lab. But when Ranketsu stopped before it, it wasn't the satellite that interested it, but the little lights that were peeking out from between ferns in the mulch below. It grabbed one (it had reclaimed its spear and slid the knives back into its sleeves), an emitter for the wan yellow light that made the satellites wide solar panels glossy almost like the real thing and tore it out. The wires snapped without resistance, and just as soon as Ranketsu had seen that, it dropped the light. Whatever it was looking for, that was not it.

There was a touch screen panel mounted on a little pedestal right before the display. There was a picture of a team of scientists applauding as the satellite was launched, a tiny rocket, slim and cased in shiny metal with big red stabilization fins. Houka and Aikuro were among the scientists, a block of text explained that taking inspiration from Ryuko's fight in space against Ragyo, the team had developed a new ultra-efficient kind of rocket powered by electricity converted directly from Kamui Misaki's power.

Ranketsu wasn't reading any of that. It ripped the screen off effortlessly, and once again found sparking wires in the pedestal. There was a slight twitch of annoyance at the corner of its

mouth, and in a smooth, instantaneous movement it swiped with its spear and eviscerated the replica satellite. All its miniscule, delicate pieces scattered into the garden and across the floor.

~ *“So this is all you came her for? To ransack our lab?”* ~ A disembodied voice resounded. Misaki’s voice. She sounded dismissive, bored even. Ranketsu spun, turning towards the statue in the center – the intercom Misaki spoke through was right near it. ~ *“Gotta say, I wish they’d sent one of the more talkative ones. You know, we’ve got a little bet going if you don’t like to chat because you know it’s no use trying to negotiate, or if you’re really just so alien it wouldn’t even occur to you to talk. But after seeing you walk around here actin’ like you don’t even know what a lightbulb is, I think we need to add in a third option that you’re just fuckin dumb.”*

Ranketsu gave no sign that it understood or even heard any of that beyond just simple sounds that a potential enemy might make (And Misaki logged that taunting had no effect – this prompted a brief and silent debate between her and Izanami about whether that was because it had no concept of pride or it wanted them to think it didn’t). It just walked towards the statue of Kinue. Before it got too close though.

~ *“That’s far enough.”* ~ Izanami’s voice this time. And suddenly the statue of Kinue dropped, its plinth dropped rapidly as though sucked into the floor. As soon as it was clear, marble tiles rose up to fill its place, so smooth and perfectly cut that it looked like the statue had never been there, like they weren’t even tiles but just part of one immense polished slab.

Silence reigned again. Ranketsu seemed to be at a loss. Then Izanami cheerfully added, ~ *“You know, we’ll just give you the kamui construction chamber blueprints if you leave now. We know you’re just going to hand them over to the Americans, maybe some other countries too but first to them, and honestly? We’ve crunched then numbers and we can definitely take them, even with kamui.”* ~ Ranketsu’s back stiffened, it tilted its head back. It was surprised!

And that told Izanami everything she wanted to hear. Nevermind that Ranketsu wouldn’t talk, it definitely understood her. And suddenly the floor tiles where the statue had been peeled away again, and something new shoot from the gloom below. Izanami’s animated face, with a huge grin. ~ *“HA! Kidding! We’d never do that!”* ~ Her face was projected on a gigantic TV screen, rising swiftly at the top of what turned out to be a huge cylindrical tower, the entire surface of which was plated with screens rendering Izanami and Misaki’s faces. ~ *“And we don’t have to!”* ~ Izanami continued proudly, ~ *“You’re already deep within our web!”* ~

~ *“You might not want to talk to us,”* ~ Misaki was leaning back, arms crossed, looking cool and confident, ~ *“But we’ll let your body do the talking instead. You’re going to be our new test subject.”*

~ *“And after that, **one of us!**”* Izanami finished, though the expression of menace was undercut a bit by her excited giggling. The tower kept rising and rising, looming overhead. Ranketsu took a step back – it was all metal and wires, it couldn’t find anything to attack.

~ *“You made a mistake coming here, and a mistake trying to steal from us!”* ~ Misaki said.

~ *“And a mistake breaking our things! We may just be kamui, but this is **our laboratory**,”* ~ As she said this, the base of the tower finally came into view, and on it Houka and Shiro were standing and the same eagerness glinted in their eyes as in their kamui’s. *“Security will escort you from the premises!”*

And then everything happened all at once. Ranketsu immediately sprang for Shiro – why him, who knew, but they had planned for both possibilities. The floor popped open right in front of Ranketsu and with a clap of compressed air a net of black threads flew. Reinforced carbon-fiber, even with a powerful slash Ranketsu could only bend it, not slice it, and all along its edges dome shaped electromagnets flew out first, encircling Ranketsu.

While that was happening, from the floor behind her a wide slab of metal flew and just at that moment all the electromagnets clasped right to it, and it flipped back and suddenly Ranketsu was prone on its back. That didn't last long though, because on the second slash Ranketsu did manage to cut the net and spring to its feet. But then, there was another one already falling from the ceiling, and by the time Ranketsu managed to cut that one a third and a fourth from the walls on either side. Walls which were buzzing with activity now, all that stillness at once revealed to be a lie.

Face contorted by rage once more, Ranketsu raised its free hand and its sleeve unfurled to fire on Shiro. For that too, there was a counter. A long limb, another one of those reflective panels, only this one glowed even more strongly with the red veins of Izanami's power. Ranketsu released a thin beam of its deadly light incinerating a hole about two feet in width in the netting around it. And then all the netting burned as Ranketsu was struck by its own attack, turned back on it in a wide, diffuse cone that scalded the floor all around. It didn't ruin the marble though, because the marble was gone. The floor wasn't made of marble anymore.

It was made of guns.

Every surface was made of guns now. The floor, the ceiling, the walls, the gardens, the balconies, even in the offices the glass windows had fallen away and needle guns had erupted from hidden compartments in every desk, every filing cabinet, every computer. Every conceivable surface bristled like a porcupine with the barrels of the same high-powered, belt-fed, life-fiber jamming needle rifles that had given even Ryuko trouble once. And so what if some of them melted. There were *plenty* more.

Another benefit of the good-old-fashioned Nudist Beach needle rifle was that it was fairly silent. The buzz of its automatic fire was comparable to a suppressed firearm, if not a bit quieter even. There was nothing quiet about thousands of them firing at once. If you've ever had a fly buzz right by your ear, you get the idea. But when the needle rifles opened fire (and they did open fire promptly, it was still less than a second after Izanami's final word) it was more as if someone took a bucketful of flies and pressed it up to your head and kept pressing until they had packed your ear canal full of the poor things as everything was abruptly tinted silver grey. No matter how fast Ranketsu spun its spear, it couldn't stop itself from near instantly becoming a pincushion – even to the point of drawing some blood which jamming needles didn't usually do. Basically vibrating in an effort to get free, it slashed in huge arcs at the nearest ones in a futile attempt to get free before giving in and leaping undeterred towards Houka and Shiro.

But of course, they weren't there anymore. And when Ranketsu landed at the base of the tower it was granted a blast of a foaming, coagulating gel and another net, and still the hailstorm of needles.

It might have all seemed like overkill, but when it came to kamui one could never be too careful. And even this was incapable of slowing Ranketsu down except to the smallest degree. It leapt into the air, spiraling fast and upwards to try to avoid the needles (which didn't work) while it sought its enemies.

Its spirals were getting wider as it climbed the atrium. The atrium was getting wider. The balconies were disconnecting, the offices behind falling away to be replaced by yet more walls coated in automatic needle guns, the whole building was peeling apart like a potato skin. Maybe when it was first built it had been a conventional skyscraper, but it had been piecemeal replaced by modular parts for just this purpose. The wider it got, the more the voids showed through to the rest of the underground facility but now it was alive with action and in every direction more pieces – tiles, rooms, cover pieces, and of course more guns, were flying in to rebuild the arena on the fly. Ranketsu kept flying up, until with a huge metallic groan the roof itself was removed. And there, just a half-dozen stories above Ranketsu, was the particle accelerator.

It was then and only then, with all the pieces in motion, that Houka and Shiro and the kamui themselves made their attack.

## Hostile Architecture: 2

October 2068

~~~~~

There was a plasma flash from the floor of the atrium, a white-hot pulse of light in the shape of a four-pointed star. Houka had just leapt into the air. Ranketsu immediately froze and turned to face him, but the walls were rapidly rushing in on all sides. The ground flipped up before her, totally obscuring her sight of Houka and suddenly placing her into a very narrow and pitch-dark room, right as the glint in his eyes became visible. Nevertheless, Ranketsu seemed to have guessed that the floor would probably vanish as soon as Houka was right on top of her, so she stayed trained on that spot.

But it was the ceiling that folded back first – an attack from above? No, in the moment that she looked up a hatch in the floor popped open and there was Houka, still ripping through the air at top speed with both swords outstretched. Ranketsu only barely managed to block both, spinning its spear back and forth with desperate violence. The shock and force of the clash carried her up into the open air, and Houka carried on with a relentless assault. Those shiny sabres, thin and flexible, turned into a whirlwind of bright flashes between them as Houka battered at once relentlessly and elegantly at Ranketsu's defenses.

Those defenses held. Ranketsu fought and at last managed to get a mighty thrust in but - *\*WHAM!\** - A plate of solid titanium was suddenly between them. The walls and floor had kept climbing with them, folding and unfolding and still belching needles at Ranketsu (while perfectly avoiding Houka's every move), and when Ranketsu thrust it was high in the above the ground-level concrete arena but mere feet above the floor. Because the floor was now between it and Houka and he vanished from sight, leaving it with its spear stuck right through the metal floor.

Ranketsu disengaged its levitation and planted its feet to wrench the spear free, sending sparks and scraps of metal flying. But just as it did two of the walls dropped – the one facing the particle accelerator and the one opposite, and from that side Shiro came roaring in. Four knives lashed out in the upper tentacles, stabbing over and over and even forcing Ranketsu to again draw the knife in its off-hand to block. And even as it did, and for a moment Izanami and Ranketsu strained evenly matched, the other four tentacles planted themselves in the floor and Shiro rocked back, tucking his narrow legs up to his body and extending them to plant a kick at maximum speed right into Ranketsu's chest. The distorted center of the accelerator yawned behind Ranketsu. But it snarled and just as it was about to fly beyond the little room built high in the air it drove its spear down into the floor and just managed to hold on.

More walls were rising, the battlefield reshaped itself still more. Needles and rockets hurtled towards Ranketsu from all sides but it was undeterred and lunged right back towards Shiro. More walls sprung up between them but this time Ranketsu plunged right through, spear held forward as though it was being pulled along. Shiro held his ground, hunching his shoulders forward the way he usually did when lost in thought, with that usual cold, faraway look in his eyes. Even a moment of hesitation like that in battle with a kamui was fatal. Except Shiro's body was only ever a distraction, and he allowed himself a small smile that would've told a human opponent he wasn't.

Just as the spear was poised to pierce his heart, steel bars whirled in from left and right and snagged perfectly around Ranketsu's wrist. Its eyes widened in alarm and even as it tried to wrench free it thrust with the knife, only for more bars to appear and have the same effect. And then as the walls peeled away entirely to once again expose Ranketsu to an entire amphitheater of guns, they began to spin. They were mounted in a ring-shaped mantle that rotated between the facility's robotic limbs, whirring as it spun faster and faster and with it spun Ranketsu like a top. And even as it did Houka suddenly fell from the sky and drop-kicked Ranketsu's left hand, snapping the knife right out of it. Shiro plucked it effortlessly out of the air and now – as if he needed it – brandished it with a subdued pride. The ring began to slowly rise, as it to insert Ranketsu into the accerator manually.

But even still, it was not to be. Its sleeve again glowed and Houka and Shiro skipped back before it fired and cleared itself from the bars and then waved wildly around, causing a chain of chaotic explosions as it immolated various pieces and components. The facility replaced them before any were missed.

*[Whoa! Looks like a caged beast is still dangerous!]* Izanami said. The humans were not doing the talking, they didn't have time to do anything but leap back into combat.

Misaki had to agree, *[Ranketsu still has energy to burn. But these primitives always have a time limit to how long they can fight without burning their host out, and with the amount of power coursing through it that limit might be coming faster than it thinks! Only one way to find out!]* They were both pumped up, every circuit racing a mile a minute as they remade the arena yet again. The tiny platform was expanding now, panels rising seemingly at random. A maze was forming, one that Houka and Shiro knew by heart. But their opponent didn't.

And sure, it got obliterated each time Ranketsu swung and it wasn't like the others were actually being too careful with it, but that only meant it was rebuilt even more intricate in just a second. At every moment Houka pressed forward, stretching long arms, long legs, longer sabres to somehow surpass the reach of Ranketsu's twirling spear, pushing her back and sliding past its blows by hairs' breadths. Shiro, using Izanami's tendrils to climb and grip just as much as for attack, vanished around corners and into the floor only to appear from another angle entirely any time that Ranketsu seemed to have Houka on the defensive. He would lure it to chase, dashing in a furious trail of blue fire through the maze only to run into yet another blast of needles with him nowhere in sight. Houka, right on its heels would thrust as if to kill and force Ranketsu to fight with its back to a wall that stung with needles and spines, or push it back into a pit that suddenly appeared before it. When it tried to take flight, there was a ceiling that bashed it down before it could build up enough speed to bash through. And when it sliced the ceiling to bits it only found itself drifting up into another chamber, totally sealed and pitch dark, and felt as it suddenly plunged, spinning end over end until it landed and shattered, right back in the maze. Where its opponents wanted to go the maze vanished for them, stairs and paths appeared and they leapt with ease, the silver mist of falling needles parting around them.

Ranketsu was strong and fast though, and it seemed fully aware that its quarry was never far away, always within stabbing range if it could just figure out *where*. When they sidled behind walls it stabbed through them, dozens of perfect holes poked in perfect succession and the kamui's huge eyes peered through with looming menace like a shark's. When it wasn't squeezed and crushed from every side it worked its spear with mesmerizing delicacy and utter brutality. Houka and Shiro were no slouches, but neither were they gods of warfare like Satsuki, Ryuko or Uzu or even on as equal footing as Nonon with the powerup Saiban got from devouring Rosuketsu. They needed to fight this way, avoiding lengthy engagements of raw fencing skill because there was the significant



chance they wouldn't win a straight duel. And even now there were a few close escapes when Ranketsu managed to pull through their guard of unleashed another barrage of incinerating light.

*[Oh hell!] Izanami shouted after a close scrape with one of those lasers. [Ranketsu survived one of its own Gamma Beams with shield mostly intact, but I don't wanna chance a direct hit! If our energy fields fail, we'll all be atomized before we even know what happened! How long until your trump card is ready Misaki?]*

*[Just a bit longer! I need a little bit more data. Why don't we try giving her some more room to move!]*

Izanami would have grinned if she could – Shiro already was grinning, *[You got it! Let's introduce her to the big guns!]* And in the moment the ground behind Shiro fell away and revealed the concrete arena behind him again – he vaulted off totally casually and Ranketsu chased after him into the open air. But she was about to run into yet another of Izanami's traps.

Below, the labyrinth was extending to cover the entire surface of the arena. It opened up in places into circular hubs, where the ground was still rising from the depths. First to come was a long, vertical tube. The barrels of special-applications railguns, designed here in the lab to be mounted on battleships. And if they were designed here in the lab it was only logical that a battery of them should be kept in reserve to protect it.

Shiro landed at the base of one of the barrels right as its car-sized pintle crested the floor. It was turning inexorably to track Ranketsu's dive-bomb descent.

**\*BZZZZT!\***

Even kamui found railguns to be a nuisance. The sheer kinetic energy packed into one of those sharp little sabots is the sort of thing that would never break a kamui's defenses. But as far as flying objects go a human wearing a kamui is incredibly light, and most railguns in the 2060s were made to pluck aircraft from the sky. They did their job well. A blast of pressurized air shot from the end of the smooth, plasticky-looking barrel and at the same time a cloud of shiny shards from the sabot. It crumpled up flat like a pancake and then burst into a million pieces, and as though it was spring-loaded Ranketsu flew back. It arced towards the particle accelerator (Izanami didn't really think Ranketsu would go in so easily but hey, she might as well try) until eventually with a pulse of golden light it caught itself and froze.

By now, all the railguns were ready to fire and with the exception of the ones that had their lines of sight blocked by the accelerator they were all trained exactly on Ranketsu. It knew this now. And so rather than dash directly at Shiro, it dashed about in a violent zig-zag. To human eyes, and even to Izanami's thousands of slow-motion cameras plastered around the lab, it looked like a jagged trail of golden-white flame suddenly appeared in the air. It was much too fast for the tracking on the railgun pintles to keep up with. It was a fascinating proof to Izanami that Ranketsu was indeed learning, adapting, but also that there were predictable limits. Ranketsu wasn't just up against a defense AI, with a bevy of predictive algorithms to prepare for every possible action, nor was she just up against a thinking, feeling kamui that could rely off instinct, it was up against the union of both. Izanami calculated just how far Ranketsu would fly before turning and the angles to which it would pivot. It aimed each railgun at one of those theoretical pivot points and they all fired at once.

Another direct hit. This time, Ranketsu hit the ground and Shiro was on top of it. Thrusting with Ranketsu's own dagger and a whirlwing of Izanami's tendrils, he was on it as it shot

to its feet. Shiro himself specialized in the pure hand-to-hand martial arts and the boost of strength and speed from his kamui made up for his own relative feebleness compared to the rest of the Kamui Corps. With Houka still some ways away he fought audaciously, invading Ranketsu's range and striking for its wrist and elbow. In their first clash he seized Ranketsu's arm, locked it up, and threw it with enough force to crack the ground below, and as the battle continued, he jabbed at her chin, stomach, and the pressure points on her back and neck. He was supremely confident that Izanami had his back, and that confidence was not misplaced. Shiro was able to fight so aggressively without being run through because she lashed out with her knives constantly and with intense precision, making sure Ranketsu was on the defensive until it was too late. In this way, Shiro gradually wore Ranketsu down and sapped the superior power that made it a deadly foe.

A battle between kamui was a dance on the razor's edge of death. Just one blow, successfully struck, would bring the fight to a close. Even if it didn't strike a Banshi and achieve a Sen-i-soshitsu deathblow, the raw force would likely eviscerate the weak human within if it pierced the kamui's defenses. And even if that didn't happen, even a glancing blow might toss the opponent, stun them, make them stagger for just an instant. Enough time for a lethal follow-up. Kamui battles were at once gaudy and hyper-efficient – distance didn't matter so fighters were quick to give ground at the slightest disadvantage, dashing around looking for a place where the terrain favored them even if just for a moment. The finishing blow could come at any moment, and that meant that any move that could confuse or distract the opponent like a spinning blade or a sudden kick to the shin was an opening. It was a mind game, and yet also demanded perfect and entire mastery of one's body and of combat – this was the art of Kamijutsu.

Houka and Shiro and their kamui were fully aware of all this and were fully unwilling to risk that kind of tightrope walk, with all that intense uncertainty that was so addictive to someone like Ryuko. That was alright for sport, during training, but not in a real battle. No, they had a plan. In this stage, they gave Ranketsu more room to maneuver and a single target. Houka stayed up above, watching intently from the first platform, while below Shiro fought in short bursts and disengaged with the aid of the facility every time he risked losing the upper hand on Ranketsu. He would jump back and forth, truly spiderlike in how he could use his legs to do so or rely on Izanami's eight tendrils to dig into the walls and whip him around. They could extend and retract like rubber, yanking him out of the way of lethal blows and slingshotting him right back into the fight. It would have been totally jarring if he didn't instinctively know exactly what Izanami was going to do – just the same as if he'd been the one to do it.

And when that wasn't enough, he tilted his head and –

**\*BZZZZT!\***

A railgun sabot would tear by, right past his ear. His hair whipped into a frenzy, but he didn't flinch. He saw Izanami input the line of code to fire it, he might as well have hit "enter" himself. The railgun was his arm, the projectile his fist. And it packed a mighty punch, hurling Ranketsu back right when it seemed poised to rip through him. Every time Ranketsu got back up, but Shiro watched from all sides through hypersensitive cameras, and Izanami's analysis programs confirmed what he saw instinctively. Her movements were getting slower – by microfractions of a second each time – and there was a slight tremor through its legs as all those hits to its host's pressure points took their toll. *So it just ignores the pain, Shiro and Izanami thought, It's calf muscles are clearly cramping, even a skilled fighter would find that distracting. I wonder if it will compensate by flying more?*

Ranketsu charged yet again. Its movements were as ever efficient. It lunged towards Shiro in one smooth moment, a single kick and it was zooming along just above the ground with one knee lifted high and the other straight and trailing elegantly behind. It held the spear with tip facing back and then swung in the same broad, destructive arc each time, though the angle and moment changed. It seemed to have Shiro's reach dialed in, and could decide in a flash whether it would swing to parry his first attack and move into a counter, or whether it would choose the more aggressive opening and swing towards the center of Shiro's body, forcing him to make a defensive move.

They repeated this pattern many dozens of times and each time Shiro changed his vector of attack, the moment in which he staged his retreat. He used the walls to stage feints, appearing ready to receive a blow before suddenly the wall to his side dropped and he dashed behind it. Ranketsu learned and adjusted, and even began charging forward with its speartip dipped into the concrete wall, slicing it into a long ribbon and hurling that into the air with a terrific shock force when it landed. There were plenty more to replace them, so Shiro wasn't bothered by all that senseless destruction. Instead, even in the thick of battle he was intrigued at how even as Ranketsu learned and adjusted to his patterns, the physical moves it used really were always exactly the same.

*[Okay, we've got enough data on its open-ground offensive moves,]* Misaki messaged them, *[Let's see some more defense. Go on the attack now!]*

*Easier said than done!* Shiro thought, making an annoyed *\*tch\** noise. Of course, she happened to ask while he was right in the thick of action.

Misaki picked up on his frustration and sarcastically said, *[Hop to it!]* with a laugh.

*[You could help, you know!]* Izanami added, *[It's not so fascinating as all that.]*

Misaki sighed and took control of some of the facility's artillery systems, *[Alright, fine. Missiles away.]* Floor panels flipped away and missiles soared into the air, screaming furiously and trailing white tails of smoke. They assembled in formation, circling in a whirlwind around Ranketsu and peeling off in pods to strike her. Ranketsu reacted by blasting the first two out of the air with its gamma bursts, but the third and the ones after it made it close enough to explode and deliver its payload. After a disorienting explosion, they left behind a thick smokescreen that twinkled with fine metallic powder. Charged with electricity, the powder clung to Ranketsu via static and all the minute, subtle sensory inputs a kamui used in the heat of battle were blocked. The faint shift in air pressure that makes hair stand on end is all the warning possible in the scale of milliseconds and deprived of that Ranketsu was effectively blind. One second it was alone in the haze, then all of a sudden Shiro was there, tendrils spread wide, a huge shadow behind him. He slapped its spear aside at the wrist and all eight of Izanami's arms wrapped around her, binding her.

This was the biggest advantage Shiro had over Ranketsu yet, and he did have a strong, strong temptation to just plunge Ranketsu's own dagger into the host's heart and just end it. *But I'll feel much more satisfaction from doing things right, even if that means dragging things out.* But Izanami's knives did rake along Ranketsu's back. The extra blood loss from those thin cuts would only reduce its effective fighting time further. She was wrapping around Ranketsu's waist and chest, squeezing as hard as she could, and Shiro was feeling it sapping his own strength. It was like back in the old days, he'd seen Ira and Uzu crush soda cans with their natural human strength, but he could never do it. And now it felt like his chest was the one that was buckling in as Izanami strained to subdue Ranketsu. It was hot, the flames of empowerment were licking along its body and sizzling on the silky cords of Izanami's tentacle arms. Suddenly, with a flick of its wrist it

dropped its spear and the dagger in its right sleeve appeared. It swiped at its bindings and Izanami retracted just a moment too slow. *[O-Ohh!]* she gasped, as one of her tentacles was sliced apart. And with her left arm now free Ranketsu used it to grab her spear, still falling, and swing to cut open Shiro's belly.

He struck back, with an open-palm strike to her jaw and at the same time a kick that knocked her off her feet. Izanami released her hold and Ranketsu was sent sailing once again, with a railgun shot and a few high-explosive missile smashed into her in midair for good measure. *I really should've just killed her!* Shiro cursed himself internally for how close that had been. Adrenaline rocketed through his heart – a rarity for him – and it gave a voice to his feelings, *Let me try that again, and I'll do it better. It acts like its just a raging brute, but it is clever. I won't let it get the best of me!* Was he thrilled or frustrated? He couldn't say. "Are you alright?" He asked Izanami.

*[Fine!]* She said, also pumped up with . Before Shiro's eyes, a new clawed tendril knit itself from the stump of the old one and grabbed one of the dozen or so spare knives Shiro was wearing. The old one, disconnected and inert on the ground, unwove and seemed to disintegrate into nothing as Izanami re-absorbed it. *[But you lost some blood from that, we've got to be careful!]*

"We will!" Shiro leapt back in. Ranketsu had been allowed to fight without too much interference from the guns, except when Shiro needed to create some distance. Now once again he used missiles, cannons, needles, and railguns to corral it with a near constant volley of fire. Shiro's openings to attack were narrower than ever, between both the enemy kamui and his own artillery support. Izanami's tendrils had gone from appearing like the legs of a spider or octopus to something more like an amoeba – sheer elasticity – and stretched for yards on end to whip Shiro towards Ranketsu and back away. He was getting well acclimated to it indeed, and laser focused on his target.

The scene of the fight was Ranketsu standing in the middle of a wide lane, dashing back and forth to dodge and occasionally using lasers or her spear to strike down missiles that came too close. They whistled past her like a swarm of flaming, angry birds and exploded variously in shocks of fire and electric smoke. And then suddenly an object in black and red, tumbling end of end and sticking to every surface would erratic strike forth. It whipped around a corner, spat a few well placed knives that sunk into Ranketu's robes and pinned it just long enough for it to spin up the lane and unfurl to reveal Shiro, upright and totally ready to deliver a flurry of punches and kicks and a couple skin-level slices. Ranketsu recoiled but when it recovered with a furious roar it ripped its robes free. A few more missiles would fall and, in the confusion, the deep red, glossy tendrils would shoot out and reclaim its knives, then vanish. The walls opened up to admit it and then when Ranketsu turned to counterattack closed and ports along them spat a wave of needles. Shiro kept the engagements even shorter and more one-sided than before, he never even allowed Ranketsu a hope of catching him. It might block, it might try to get a parting blow in, but if it ever came close the walls on all sides would flip over to reveal rows of spikes that rapidly contracted on it and forced it back.

Things went on this way for several minutes (enough time for plenty of individual bouts and much data to be collected). There was no noticeable change in Ranketsu's "emotions" during this, it seemed totally enraged at all times. But eventually it had enough. When Shiro appeared it help its ground and charged another gamma burst, ignoring all the missiles. It was engulfed in explosions, but Shiro aborted the attack early and out of an abundance of caution dropped into the floor and down several layers. A good move. The beam of blue light appeared from within its sleeve and it didn't dissipate. Ranketsu carefully, methodically dragged it along the wall, melting right through it. And its sleeve blossomed wider, the beam grew in intensity. It emitted a thin whine as it

became wide enough to engulf the labyrinth walls entirely, and then Ranketsu dropped its spear and fired another from its right hand. Sustaining them both, it waved its arms wildly in every direction.

The whole intricately constructed battlefield was washed away in waves of slag. Reflector shields – panels of powerful electromagnets that dissipated the radiative energy of the beams – were deployed to coat the railguns and of course the particle accelerator, turning them into glittering domes. But everything else aboveground was swept away. Where the beams struck the outer life-fiber barrier they dissipated like auroras, coruscating blue light sweeping across the inside of the shield. But when they got wide enough, they ceased to be clean, precise bursts of blue light. They erupted with a tremendous roar into fire. Blazing orange storms the washed over the whole arena, cracked through the arena floor and all its reinforced sublayers and carved down deep into the facility depths.

Shiro leapt back and forth between the struts to dodge the beams that shoot by at random. *No, it'll destroy everything!* He had a moment of panic, but the lab was fighting back. The buildings dropped still lower, giving them just an instant of reaction time to wheel away before the flames hit. It looked like some kind of very complex puzzle, working itself automatically to keep every piece away from the fires. Heatshields, fire-suppressant gas canisters, and other sacrificial pieces rolled into place along the struts, bouncing back and forth towards the fire in zigzagging, right-angled patterns. They hit their appointed places and slotted in, were consumed and immolated, and replaced just as quickly.

Everything moved on the same lattice of struts, a system of rails that was itself very simple but allowed for an infinitely complex set of arrangements. And even then the raw energy Ranketsu fired could burn through the struts themselves, leaving trails of orange glowing dead-ends off into the dark distance. Even they were replaceable though, and when one piece was broken it automatically popped off at the corners and riding up along would come another piece, manipulated by dozens of little arms to pop back into place and just like that the gap was mended. If Shiro wasn't so busy avoiding the lethal waves of light and fire himself, he would have been dazzled by the sophistication with which all these metal machines moved in accordance with a single plan. Like a beehive they came together to rebuild themselves even as they were destroyed.

*[It's burning the oxygen in the air!]* Izanami exclaimed, and swiftly synthesized a gas mask from her fabric to wrap around the bottom of Shiro's face. Up above, Misaki was doing the same. *[This is insane!]* She shouted – while Shiro hung in wait in the darkness she watched through camera eyes as the inferno raged. The entire surface of the arena was coated in roaring flames and they ballooned into a cloud that filled the bubble of the barrier, like a gigantic lightbulb. It roared deep and rough like an unfathomably large beast.

Houka, hiding near the accelerator, had another take though, ~ *“This must take an incredible amount of energy! If it didn't greatly weaken Ranketsu, it would have done it from the start.”* ~

And indeed eventually the flames died down. All the oxygen in the arena had been consumed and so Ranketsu's fire was starved at its source, and the moment the light faded new replacement tiles raced up to fill in the floor again. With it, a platform rose next to Shiro's perch on a metal beam, and he rode it back up to the surface. A circular hatch popped open above was world of wreckage. Smoldering piles of slag rose high, chunks of concrete and twisted metal simmered together. The shielding around the artillery guns and the particle accelerated slowly unfurled. They, at least, were unharmed. Around the distant rim of the field, just below the emitters for the life-fiber barrier, there were vents through which fresh air from outside was being pumped in with a loud hiss (After

just a moment the air was breatheable again and Izanami removed Shiro's gas mask) In the middle, in a ring blackened by drifting ash, Ranketsu was standing hunched.

Shiro breathed a sigh of relief. It was no longer wreathed in flames. It had used up the last of its cosmic empowerment in one massive burst. Though its host stood tall, still, disciplined like a statue, her living flesh was betraying signs of weakness. Trembling fingers, a slight paleness, frayed hair. But her eyes and the kamui's were open wider than ever, bloodshot and alert. They stared through Shiro, unblinking.

He rubbed his mouth. "Looks like we'll have to go without cover from here. Ready the tranquilizer darts," he told Izanami. The tile next to him popped open and a magnetic bandolier filled with thin syringes with red stabilizer fins emerged on a little plinth. He wrapped it around himself and clasped the magnets tight to Izanami's thin chest armor. "It's a risk, but she might be slow enough now that the darts have a chance at landing. Ready?"

"That won't be necessary!" It was Houka, striding confidently through the rubble. Misaki had changed form around him slightly, forming a pair of tinted glasses in his favorite sky blue shade, clasped to his temples. He, unlike both Ranketsu and Shiro, looked none the worse for the wear. Shiro smiled – he could have said *"About time"* or something pithy like that but in truth Houka hadn't kept him waiting at all. In fact, he was surprised to see him ready so soon. Houka brandished his sabres and kept walking towards Ranketsu, "You ready, Misaki."

~ *"You bet!"* ~ She shouted, and then, in a more stilted and artificial sounding tone said, ~ *"Data Analysis Complete. Engaging Predictive Combat Mode."* ~

Houka's glasses lit up with a bright electric light that obscured his eyes and he kept walking towards Ranketsu, now invading her circle of cleared, scorched space. "You REVOCS kamui are fascinating, did you know that?" He called to her, "You are true alien life forms, and it shows. Ryuko one time called life-fibers 'cells that think', and in my opinion she was right on that count. And here you are, a complete being made completely from those cells. You're people, alien people!" Ranketsu did not seem to be taking this in. It was getting its trembling back under control, and its host slowly loosened up its locked knees and stiff back. Houka pointed a sabre at it, "What are you thinking in there? What really goes on inside your head?"

Well, that was a threat. Ranketsu immediately lifted its arm and began charging a gamma burst. Houka sprang into action too, ducking his long neck down and dashing – not away from her to dodge, but directly towards her! In one languid motion he snaked his arm out and the flexible end of his sabre snagged right into her sleeve, on the side closer to her body, and poked through on the other side. He twisted, and just as the beam of light flew from Ranketsu her arm was jerked up. The beam went wide and slammed into the shield dome.

Houka's smile was thin and gleefully smug. "Now, how did I do that?" He said, "Can you guess?"

Ranketsu wasn't interested in guessing. It stabbed at his belly with its speartip, but Houka bent an impecetible amount to the right and it slid right by, missing him completely. And now he had a free sabre right in its face. Ranketsu had to leap back, there was no other way to dodge that thrust, but instead of committing to that attack he leapt right after, keeping pace across the rubble. Ranketsu attacked with redoubled fury, chaining together one attack after another in a desperate attempt to overwhelm Houka.

It was never going to work. He never stepped back, never allowed a parry to rob him of momentum or a chance to attack. Almost like a mirror of Ranketsu, he snapped from move to

move in a jerky, seemingly random succession, with his sabres flashing into the space it occupied milliseconds ago each time. But where its attacks hit nothing but the wreckage and kicked up titanic shockwaves of ash and shrapnel, his were precise and never failed to block or force it onto the defense. It was as if he knew at every turn what she was going to do.

“It’s almost as if I know what you’re going to, isn’t it?” He said, talking totally calmly while they raced around the arena locked together at top speed. “That’s because I *do*. You wield that human body like a puppet, that’s how I know you’re truly alien. Do you understand what that means? It means that you are incapable of variation. All of your techniques, your strikes, parries, ripostes, feints, your jumps and your slides, you execute them the same every time.”

Even as he spoke, he fought with the utmost confidence. Houka spread his legs far apart, lunging into his strikes and his blocks, looping his swords around and even turning his back to Ranketsu to mix in roundhouse kicks and whirlwind spin attacks. It was a fighting style that left him wide open and he could only execute it because he knew each point he was expected to defend at. Even now, his glasses showed him an overlaid image, transparent 3d rendered predictions the position Ranketsu’s body would take in the next half second. Sometimes it would fan out as a strike could come anywhere from a totally flat horizontal to a complete vertical, other times all those overlaid and slightly varied images of Ranketsu would come together into one certainty. It was in those moments that Houka struck with perfect confidence, with Misaki whispering in his ear the instinctive guidance of exactly how to move his body to strike at her opening.

He continued, “Uzu and Nonon were the first to notice this, naturally, but they thought that you were simply incapable of learning. That’s not true though, is it? I’ve seen you adjust your methods in this very fight, change *how* you use your techniques. But the techniques themselves, that’s what you can’t change. You’re like a character in a fighting game!” With a proud flourish, Houka hammered his point home by sliding past a spear thrust and bashing Ranketsu on the forehead with a pommel. The resultant shockwave as she struck the ground and bounced back up blasted the rubble away and revealed a wide section of the floor. It was rising, a ring of concentric steps slowly whirring into position, so that in the center the distortion within the particle accelerator was right at ground level. And Houka never let Ranketsu back away from it – Houka let it move laterally, circling, but it really was more of a spiral because he was always pressing steadily inward.

Ranketsu recovered almost immediately, seeming driven by rage now that it had lost its empowerment. Rather than return to standing it abruptly engaged its levitation and lunged right at Houka, trying to rocket right through him. He leaned back and parried its spear and it sped on past – making a parting swipe at his back which Houka likewise blocked without looking. “But I’m not limited like that, don’t you see?” He shouted as Ranketsu sped away, froze in midair and instantly changed direction to rush back at him. It spun its spear as it zoomed low, carving into the floor and kicking up sparks and it seemed impossible to guess from which angle the next blow would come. But according to Misaki’s calculations, there was a 90% chance it was a nearly vertical strike with a slight leftward angle that would come next, and if not that then a wide horizontal slash would come – slightly earlier, so the speartip would cut through Houka’s body. He held his ground and wait, and when the horizontal slash didn’t appear all probability came together into certainty. The spinning spear seemed solid like a helicopter rotor but he thrust a long, thin sabre-blade right through it, right where it wasn’t. A thin splash of blood confirmed that he had indeed scored another grazing wound to Ranketsu’s host. Grazing, but crippling to the beast’s pride.

“Do you get it yet?” Houka asked. Ranketsu stared at him with an indescribable mix of fear and revulsion. “Every fighting form has its weaknesses. The blade is the tool used both to kill and to defend, but its greatest strength is not that capability. It’s that you don’t know for sure where it will

be. But because of your limits, it only requires that Misaki observe every one of your forms, records where your weapon is at every moment in every one of your techniques, and then convey that to me. Why, it only requires a few hundred-thousand terabytes to record everything you are capable of in high definition. And you've given us plenty of time to collect all the data we need."

Shiro was watching all of this, standing beside a culture-tank of life-fibers Izanami had called up. She was steadily absorbing them, replenishing her stamina. Shiro, on the other hand, was all but certain he wouldn't have to fight again. Their plan had worked perfectly, Ranketsu was exhausted and now Houka stood poised to deliver a statistically certain finishing blow. It was beautiful, and Shiro was chuckling to himself. He had no reason to disguise or temper his satisfaction anymore – all he had to do was watch with pleasure how Houka demonstrated his, *their*, intellectual superiority over the alien. Houka had conceived of this solution months ago, after agonizing over combat footage of the REVOCS kamui. And now they had put it in action. *It's truly beautiful*, he thought, *that in combat the life-fibers can't match the human intellect. All their millions of years controlling the universe, manipulating civilizations to do their bidding, have made them forget the simple art of fighting and winning. If they ever even knew. Were they once like us, creatures of flesh and blood locked in the Darwinian battle of survival of the fittest? Or have they always been apart from the world we know?* If he was curious about that, he could only imagine how it ate at Houka. *That's why it's so important that we capture Ranketsu, and make it tell us everything it knows.*

"So Ranketsu, what do you think of us now?" Houka was still shouting as he fought, "And do you know the best part? This combat analysis method isn't even *new*! I've been using a weaker version of this technique against weaker opponents since Honnouji!" Now he really was hammering Ranketsu home, funneling right towards captivity. "When I tried it against Ryuko, she countered it, she used a new technique she'd never tried before that I couldn't predict. But that isn't possible for you. Whatever surprises you hold, they *won't* be in your fighting technique. And that means no matter what, you can't hit me. So please, indulge me. Tell me what it's like to fight against your hard counter."



# Two Forms of Mercy

October 2068

~~~~~

Down far below the surface where Ranketsu battled the laboratory's "security team", the various thuds, booms, and crashes of their combat all melded together into a dull roar. In the observation room of the kamui construction chamber, the chairs rattled as beams of immolating light and flesh-melting radiation ripped through the facility structure above. Here, in the same room where Ryuko and Mako had once sat in discussing designs for Mataro's kamui, there were now nine couturières standing guard.

They had just finished their mission – to photograph the kamui construction chamber itself – and a pair of them were carefully placing cameras in a set of armor cased boxes set in a line on the desk. Old-fashioned film cameras: against the mysterious AI whose lair they were presently deep within, they had despaired of using anything higher tech than that. If they used a digital camera to try to send photos wirelessly, they would be intercepted and that might even let the beast insert its viral fingers into the REVOCS network. That would be the end of everything. And they weren't going to try to hack the system directly or even just access it like they worked here. There were computers all over the room, but they had smashed most of them and the rest they didn't touch. They all suffered under a nervous superstition that just touching a keyboard would somehow cause the AI to strike back and electrocute them or something.

But they concealed these fears well. Their faces were like masks, about half of them stoic scowls, the others seemingly serene. As befit the best of the best, the Mistresses of the Couturière Order.

In another context, they would have resembled a clique of socialites more than a band of warriors. They were each devastatingly beautiful in their own way, be they a tanned surfer girl with sunbleached hair and a perfect beach bod or a genteel noblewoman, pale and soft with dazzling big doe-eyes. Even now they were bedecked in jewelry that paired well with the vivid biolights of their Ultima Uniforms; they were the only members of the REVOCS army permitted to express themselves that way. During the height of Ragyo's power, they donned life-fiber clothing that resembled more ordinary apparel. Blushing and giggling coyly, as though dazzled by the wealth and fine manners of the bankers and businessmen that always swarmed around Ragyo, their disguise was flawless. Unless you knew their secret, they were simply models, starlets, fashionistas – the exact kind of ladies that the glamorous CEO of REVOCS would naturally befriend. Anyone would walk away from them dizzy from their beauty, convinced that every misogynistic idea about the delicate sensibilities of the fair sex was completely true.

But now, all that pretense was dropped. They were kitted for war, they carried themselves as soldiers. The *Praetorian* and *Varangian* Ultima uniform were lightweight but ironclad suits of armor – with crested helmets and wide pauldrons, mailed fists and built-in cannons in their gauntlets. Their weaponry was identical and designed to give them the best chance against a kamui possible. Each couturière had a shiny hardened life-fiber longsword with an ornate fencing cage in one hand, and in the other a big brick of a gun, basically a sawed-off machinegun. No human could lift a weapon like that without the aid of life-fibers, let alone control its recoil. These guns, which they handled with the finesse of old-west sheriffs, had wide drum magazines whose clear acrylic

casing showed dozens of glowing bullets. Starching rounds that could momentarily disable a kamui. If they hit. *Can I possibly score a hit?* They all thought. But though they knew just how deadly a kamui was, they had not yet despaired. Like the best soldiers, they all held a secret hope that they could finesse a victory out of long odds and took every step they could to prepare. They had knocked out all the security cameras and were posted up in pairs guarding the doors, carefully considering the sight lines so that none of them were visible from the outside.

To Lucille, the youngest of them (she was the tan surfer girl), it was a moment that lasted forever. She was guarding the main door, but out of the corner of her eye she was watching as Camilla and Andrea put the cameras away. It was marvelous, her older “sisters” were so calm, their hands so steady. But *Goddess*, couldn’t they just hurry up? Lucille was trying not to think about it, she didn’t *want* to think about it, but on the way down they had seen Ranketsu fighting against four of those demons. Four! The image of them kept flashing in her mind. She had no way to describe the terror it struck in her, that wasn’t something REVOCS discussed.

She looked to Federique, their leader. She oversaw the camera-packing with her arms crossed. She too seemed so totally calm, just looking at her Lucille felt her tension slip away. Federique motioned for everyone to take a camera with her typical frown; soft and only vaguely aggrieved. It gave the motion a solemn gravity and Lucille’s heart soared as she hurried to comply. She adored Federique, in a much more personal way than she had Ragyo. Her teacher in everything – war, love, the arts, and of course the secrets of the life-fibers – Federique was closer to Lucille than her own mother who, as far as Lucille knew, had been killed by a kamui several months ago (she was an ordinary soldier and thus beneath Lucille’s new status).

Federique’s voice was unhurried. “My dears, we shall now rendezvous with beta team,” she said in French, “They will by now have finished planting their charges. We must pray that all has gone well with them.” In truth they had lost contact with beta team. Their modern comms radios had been jammed – which was expected – and so had their backup walkie-talkies – which was not. But Lucille studied her mistress’s aristocratic face, the rosy, dimpled cheeks, high brow-line, wide green eyes and small mouth with its full, red lips. It was an honest face, and one Lucille knew very well, and she really didn’t see any alarm. Maybe things would be alright after all.

Outside the observation room’s door, there was only the darkness of the very bottom of the laboratory. There were no lights this far down besides that which rose from the two massive server stacks on either side of the kamui chamber. Like a campfire in a dark wood, they illuminated forests of orderly metal struts which vanished into the gloom.

Despite being the most faithful of all in REVOCS, or perhaps because of it, that atmosphere had an effect on all of them. As they were pairing off to dash across the open ground, Maria, who had been in the fight since before Lucille could walk, quietly said, “Sure is hot down here.”

“The belly of the beast,” Camilla replied. So far underground the air was indeed warm, heavy and still, so that comment was not kind to Lucille’s overactive imagination. She fought down a shudder. No matter that they found themselves in this awful place, this mechanized hell, she would do her job. She wouldn’t let Federique down.

This next frozen moment as they all steeled themselves for the mad dash ended when the first pair leapt out of the doorway. It wasn’t even a long distance, a mere fifty yards at most, but they took it at top speed which meant only a single stride with an Ultima Uniform. Two bright flashes of light illuminated the gloom, and they were off.

And this level of caution really was entirely necessary, the way they saw it. Jakuzure could come whizzing out of the gloom at supersonic speeds at any moment, impale one of them, and be gone just as quick. That would be just like the Pink Devil, who fought with the cold-blooded cunning of a snake. Each pair crossed and each time Lucille held her breath, but in the same instant they left they arrived standing before the Izanami's glowing red server tower, into whose labyrinthine hallways they slipped unharmed.

Finally, it was her and Federique left. "Ready, darling?" Federique asked. Lucille nodded, and they too crossed safely.

Izanami's server stack, once just a few rows of orderly macroprocessors and her living core in a little bunker, were a building unto themselves. Towering racks of circuitry made up its walls, and maintenance pathways its many hallways. The intricate, cryptic patterns were made up of a mosaic of lights and glinting metals but running through all of it was a red glow from countless life-fibers. They were razor thin, but they pulsed rhythmically, expressing an invisible glut of living energy. The thoughts of something huge beyond comprehension. Lucille had half a mind to start swinging her sword and firing her gun in every direction until all that fragile webbing was shredded. But it couldn't be that easy, could it? She couldn't shake the feeling that here too, everything had to be booby-trapped.

And besides, they didn't have far to go before they found beta team.

The rest of the couturières stood frozen in the entranceway, stiff with shock. There was beta team, neatly in a row on the floor, naked and pallid and locked in openmouthed surprise. Each of them had a precise stab wound, right through their heart from back to front. None of them had seen it coming.

Lucille's blood ran cold. This was far from the first time she'd seen death – she'd killed plenty too, indeed part of a couturière's induction into the order was the ritual execution of a wrongdoer from the lower ranks of REVOCS – but this was the first time it was real. The first time it had happened to someone she knew, someone who mattered. Another young couturière who had been inducted along with Lucille, Helene, was easily recognizable by her velvety-soft blue mohawk. Stocky and buxom despite her youth, she'd been the best *Medjay* operator in the order, a prodigy. And now there she was, as dead as the rest. Helene had always been the one with the wild promises, the speeches that it would be them, the up-and-comers, who would restore the goddess and set things right; Lucille preferred to leave such tough tasks up to the elders, just do her duty, and have faith. But all those promises were gone now that Helene was laying there, trapped forever in this place.

"Oh, *goddess!*" One of the other couturières whispered – Lucille was so transfixed on the bodies she didn't even know which.

Someone else said, "This must be The Prince's doing," Which was a realization that frightened all of them, Lucille most of all. Mataro Mankanshoku, Matoi's Own Assassin, the Prince of Light and Shadows was here too? Not only did that mean half the kamui were here and the plan to distract them had been a total failure, but in a place like this *he* was certainly the most dangerous of them all. *At any moment he could strike, and then it will all be over! It's already all over!* The rest of the team were combat ready, guns and swords facing out into the maze of corridors, but Lucille was frozen feeling nothing but her own pounding heart and shameful, total dread. *I want to go home!* She thought. All the oaths she had sworn to serve the Goddess, the Order, and the Life-Fibers even unto death flashed through her mind, *But I can't die here, I can't be*

*like them, stuck here forever!* In her fevered imagination this *was* hell, and so she would remain trapped in her limp body as it went cold and stiff and rotten. Helene, Federique, they were brave, they could face that fate with dignity and die as martyrs, but Lucille saw clearly now that when she took those oaths she'd been lying. *I'm a failure!* She was on the verge of collapsing on her own knowing that Federique would surely fall beside her, forever reproaching her that she couldn't even die properly.

"We need to go. Now!" Federique yelled, and Lucille jumped. Blind in panic, she barreled out with the rest of them. But here they froze too.

Nonon had arrived.

She was swooping down, in between the struts and disassembled buildings. Saiban's golden glow and the distortion of air from her hovering "tuning forks" made her look like a ball of fire, a meteor. From this far out Nonon herself was still invisible, but that furious light was enough. Even to someone like Lucille who had seen life-fibers in all their forms, it was something not of this world. Her heart was pounding so strongly that she could feel her blood racing, and it felt like an invisible pressure Nonon was inflicting on her.

*So, we never had a chance after all,* it was almost a calming thought. At least this way, they would all be chopped to bits and burnt to cinders in an instant, and at least this way they wouldn't be killed from out of nowhere and with no warning. They could watch their doom descend on them. It was suitably apocalyptic.

Federique put her hand on Lucille's trembling shoulder. She was smiling, wistful and tender. "Well, my darling Lucille, it's time for you to go."

"W-what?" Lucille turned to protest, but Federique just clamped on her shoulders with both hands and fixed her with an intense stare.

"Listen to me carefully now. These may well be my final orders to you," She said. "You must take your camera and run. Bring it home. The mission now rests on you, Lucille."

"... Run?" Lucille was in a daze. *I can't be hearing this right!* "But, what about you?"

"Oh, you mustn't think about that. You mustn't look back!"

"But *maman!*" she was beginning to cry.

Federique kissed her. Lucille tried to lean into it, but it was painfully brief. There were tears in her eyes too. "It's alright," She said, "My time is over, darling. But you, your life is just beginning. I... am sorry I brought you here. I see now it was my cowardice, I did not want to be without you, in my last moments. But I cannot let this place be your tomb either. So wait no longer, run! Before she sees you!"

The other couturières were smiling the same way, resigned to their deaths. Lucille's lips tried to open into a full sob, but a last force of discipline kept her face from breaking. They had all seen her evident terror, they all looked on her as a little sister or a niece. Their choice for who ought to survive was unanimous, and it wrenched at Lucille horribly. But she obeyed, turning and sprinting off into the gloom. She engaged her Ultima Uniform's flight and lifted away. She even obeyed Federique's order not to look back because when she tried to tears welled up and she nearly

crashed into a strut. “I... I’ll never give up! Never! I’ll never forget you!” She finally managed to shout into the darkness, and she could only hope they heard.

To her joy, Federique’s voice did respond, drifting through the warm, soupy air. “Keep the faith, my love! Even in hiding, even in secret, always keep the faith! Ragyo will return! So keep the faith, and *live!*”

Soon enough she was gone, dipping behind the blocky black hull of a building. Now only eight of the original eighteen couturières remained to expect Nonon’s arrival.

Nonon didn’t keep them waiting long. She had spotted them, and from their perspective seemed to stop. The speck of light grew, the air screamed, and within seconds she materialized. This was the first time any of the couturières had seen a kamui – high ranking REVOCS members generally did not run into one and live to tell the tale - and their mythologically-attuned minds were struck by her. They saw a female Oberon, a fairy princess, and just like Shakespeare’s Oberon she was filled with a capricious hatred for beings lesser than her own perfect self.

And it wasn’t like Nonon minded that she created that sort of impression. She touched down on the points of her toes like a ballerina and very purposefully contrasted that dainty entrance by spinning *Kiba* like a baton so fast that it blurred and kicked up sparks on the ground. “Alright! You girls know the score!” She barked. “Let’s dance!”

But then she actually took a look at the couturières, and a spark of recognition lit up her eyes. “Hey! Why, if it isn’t Mademoiselle Federique de Vivendi!” It was a shock to the couturières, even Federique. Nonon was beaming right at her, friendly and genuinely happy to see her, not at all the monster they expected.

“Hello, Mademoiselle Jakuzure,” Federique answered stiffly. “It’s been a while.”

“Hasn’t it though?” Even as the other couturières crept around to encircle her, swords and guns at the ready, Nonon was totally calm and leant on *Kiba*. “So how about this, I really didn’t expect to run into my old piano tutor today! And you haven’t changed a bit! You’ve been keeping well, mademoiselle.” She turned to one of the others and said, “She was Satsuki’s fencing instructor too, you know. We used to see a lot of each other.”

“Indeed,” Federique agreed. Better to keep Nonon talking, stall for time for Lucille’s sake.

“I don’t think I had a chance to tell you, but I appreciated that you came to all of my concertos at Honnouji. Even when I learned you were a Couturière, it meant a lot that you found it worth your time.”

Federique managed a polite smile, “Of course. Your selection was admirably tasteful, your performers talented and disciplined, your conductorial style bold and without flaw.”

Nonon giggled, flattered despite herself, “Why, thank you!”

On the other hand, seeing that self-satisfied smirk on the woman that killed Rosuketsu made Federique’s blood boil. “You malignant, scheming, egotistical *cunt*,” She spat, picking each word out with venomous intonation.

There was no change in Nonon's smile, but she sounded a bit less friendly when she said, "I'll pretend I didn't hear that." And then, right back to good cheer, "So listen, in light of everything you've done for me, I've got a deal for you. I'll let you take your Ultima Uniform off before I kill you, so that way you just die normally and aren't damned forever."

It was one shock after another for the couturières. As if it weren't enough to see that Nonon was no demon, but a lady of good breeding and manners like themselves, they'd never heard *anyone* express that idea before. And she said it with such casual simplicity! They shuffled their feet, anxious for Federique to give them the order to attack and stop Nonon from saying these troubling things.

Nonon noticed this, "I'm not fuckin – uh, not joking with you. I think it's only fair I let you know. You die wearing that thing it'll harvest your soul, that's all there is to it. And either way, I've got to kill you so..." Nonon shrugged, "You might as well."

After a second, a ghost of a smile lifted Federique's lips. She shot a glance over towards the other couturières. "Very well. I'll remove my uniform, on one condition. You must power down your kamui and fight me with your mortal body."

"Hmm." It didn't take Nonon long to decide. "Yeah, alright, that's only fair. You first." Federique complied, taking as long as reasonably possible to languidly unlatched and disassembled her uniform. She removed her helmet and let her long, curly blonde hair pour out, breaking the connection between the uniform's life-fibers. Its lights faded with a thin hum, but she proceeded in removing the rest of it anyway until she was fully naked. She even set her gun down – fully banking on Nonon's honor to keep her alive.

Nonon didn't cut her down where she stood, even though it would've been child's play now. But she did grin and say, "Why thank you, now one sec." And then in one smooth movement slid her hands down to one end of *Kiba*, leaned back, and spun a pretty pirouette at lightning speed. *Kiba* flashed out at its full length and slashed right through every one of the couturières' guns. All Federique could do was watch in stammering, openmouthed shock.

"Phahaha!" Nonon laughed, "You fuckin' thought, bitch! I'm not gonna let you *shoot* me!" Federique was beet red, her followers too were stewing with rage. "You really thought that was gonna work, too! Now back up!" She pointed *Kiba* at one of the other couturières, still staring Federique down. *Now* that contemptuous glare the wearer of Kamui Saiban was famous for shone through, "You all can wait your turn."

Once they had conceded, backing up to make a wide circle for her and Federique to fight in, Nonon finally powered down. She was engulfed in a sparkling light and then emerged again, wearing Saiban in his usual dress form. Nonon stepped up to Federique, they bowed, they took their stances, and they fought.

It was not a long fight. Federique drove at Nonon, furious, forcing her onto the defensive. She held a fencing stance, legs wide, arm extended, sword pointing straight for Nonon's heart. Using this refined technique she jabbed at Nonon's chest, made tiny, precise slashes by flicking her wrist, and so kept the pressure on and prevented her from swinging her Naginata wide enough to fully use its power. She was biting her lip in clenched concentration, desperate not to choke now that her enemy was vulnerable. It was *possible* to kill Nonon! She was so close!

And desperate to reach that closure, Federique rushed. She gave Nonon an opening and hadn't even realized it. She was a talented swordswoman and it was a very narrow opening. But

though she was good, Nonon was better, and Federique realized it just a moment too late. She was struck by the look in Nonon's eyes. Intense, eagle-like, Federique was good at reading such things too and so she realized that though Nonon was on the defensive, she was far from pressed. And then a faint click – she had flipped her Seki-Tekko bracelet. *Why would she do tha-*

“AAGH!” *Kiba* slapped down on Federique's shoulder, biting deep into her bare chest. It was over, the strength instantly left Federique with a fountain of her blood. She slumped into *Kiba*, and when Nonon lifted it flopped on the ground. Her couturières were already charging at Nonon with roaring battle cries, but she had been looking ahead with those piercing eyes that now turned calmly to the couturières. She had already flipped her Seki-Tekko and Saiban was already bursting off her body to transform.

It goes without saying that after Federique had fallen to Nonon in a fair fight, none of her followers stood much of a chance against her full power.

~~~~~

Lucille was lost. Physically too, although it was the moral angle of her total abandonment that hit her first. The first thing she thought to do was head for the surface, to try and swoop up at an angle so that she was far from the center of the facility when she reached ground level. But her timing couldn't have been worse, for Ranketsu had just begun burning off the last of its cosmic empowerment, and so everything was falling apart and being rebuilt around her. Everywhere she went, flaming wreckage or moving machinery seemed to block her path, and she was too panicked to work through this three-dimensional maze. *What is happening!* She screamed to herself, and zipped around like a fly in a jar. If there had been a clean route to escape, she wouldn't have seen it.

Eventually she crashed into something. She raced into an open space of black void, but at the last moment an explosion behind her glinted off it and revealed it to be a wide window. She smashed right through it and wiped out on a smooth tile floor.

When she hit the wall on the other side, the breath was knocked out of Lucille and her senses were knocked back into her. She jolted up – she still had to get away! But that seemed impossible, now that she had taken stock of the situation. She found herself in a very ordinary looking laboratory, with wide tables and cabinets filled with unassuming beakers and vials. Through the broken glass, all she saw was an inferno. Something big had dropped down, a hunk of bubbling metal wreathed in fire, and on the lattice of trackways around it dozens of small machines worked to fight the fire with long hoses spraying water and fire retardant powders. It was so bright, a wall of fire, that a kamui could have been floating on the other side and she wouldn't have seen them.

The thought made Lucille jolt. No, no it was best to stay here, in the dark, and wait it out. *I'll just sneak out when it's all over. Yeah, they'll think they killed us all, they'll make the place turn back to how it usually looks, and then I'll just sneak out!* Feverish relief – once again, her cowardice was an advantage! She dove for a hiding spot right below the window and pressed herself flat. Nobody looking in from outside would ever notice her, she hoped. *I'll just slip away, and then –*

And then what? Call for help? *No, that's not possible. They'll intercept it! I'll have to get back myself.* How? She didn't know the way back to the secret base, and even if she did she knew it was hundreds of miles away! *I'll never make it! It's across an ocean, the Praetorian model doesn't have that kind of range! And besides, they'll see me! This is enemy territory, they-they have jets,*

*and drones, and... And an entire nation of savages who blamed her for everything wrong in the world. They would be happy to rip her apart, Lucille had been assured. No! No I **can't** die like that! So, go ditch the uniform and go incognito. And wear what? And what about getting back to REVOCS? Could she steal a boat? Steal a **boat**? How could I ever do that? I don't even know how to drive a boat! And besides, what would I be going back to? REVOCS is finished. Hell, that was the whole point of this mission, to steal the secret to making kamui and give it away as one last act of revenge, let the demons multiply and fight each other until they dragged this world down to hell. By the time I get back, headquarters may already have fallen. Could she survive somehow, bide her time, seek out other survivors? How? I have no money, no friends, no family! I'll be a nobody! How would I even eat! I'd have to live on the street, steal and beg and... and sell my body and... Oh Goddess, Oh Goddess, I'll be just like **them**! Worse! And I'll be alone, all alone...*

It was through this tortured train of thought that Lucille realized just how alone she truly was. She cried, and without anything to focus on except her hopeless situation was wracked by violent sobs. Mostly it was for Federique, and for herself for now having to live without her. But it was also for Ragyo, for the Life-Fibers, for the prophesized paradise. Was this really how it all ended? Lucille was used to loss, at least in concept. That was the REVOCS she had come of age in, memorizing the names of a pantheon of heroes martyred by the kamui, living in expectation that she would join them. But she was utterly unprepared to really experience it.

For a while, she managed to keep almost totally silent even as she cringed in on herself. But eventually she almost instinctively began praying, hands clasped together. "Oh Goddess... Oh Goddess... Please..." She couldn't finish that plea. What miracle was coming for her? Federique wouldn't return to life, Ryuko wouldn't drop dead, just because she wished it. She tried to summon up that bright and divine feeling that made it all worth it, but it seemed so faint and far away. *Please, just let it all somehow go away*, was what she plead in her heart, *Please, just make it all better*.

"You're praying to a dead god, you know that?"

"HIIEEE!" Lucille tried to scream but it was cut off as her heart jumped painfully in her throat. She scrambled upright, pressing her back against the wall. In the doorway, peering at her over a desk, was a pair of enormous yellow eyes that receded ever inwards like whirlpools.

Then Mataro flicked on the lights. Lucille's immediate reaction was to squeeze her eyes shut, raise her gun with stiff arm pointed right at him, and fire wildly. "Whoa!" Mataro exclaimed, nonchalantly sidestepping into the room as the bullets whined past him and obliterated tiles and countertops. Lucille tracked him as best her trembling hands could, but he was too quick and when he reached on end of the room he zig-zagged back, right through her cone of fire. They weren't especially fast or anything, so he just had to find an angle where he could slide through. But for Lucille that was the last straw, and with a desperate, seething growl through clenched teeth she waved her hand wildly all over the room. *One* shot had to hit him, right?

Of course, they did not. And when the gun began to rapidly click, Lucille reached to her belt and pulled another magazine out with thoughtless, mechanical precision. But before she could reload the gun was wrenched out of her hand. One of Mataro's swords, flung like a spear from his outstretched hand, stabbed right through the barrel and impaled itself on the on the opposite wall. Around it, the gun fell apart with a crunchy sound. "Knock it off!" Mataro yelled. Lucille didn't hear him, but she stared at him with seething hatred balanced only by utter panic. *He killed Helene!* When he strolled up and leaned on the shot-up desk in front of her, she pointed her sword



at him and struggled to her feet. Something about that mocking smile on his wide Mankanshoku mouth reignited her bravery and fury.

Mataro on the other hand had already decided he wouldn't kill her. She was the last couturière alive, not really much of a threat. It wasn't a chill move to toy with someone who was about to die, but since that wasn't an issue, he might as well mess with this girl a little. He carefully set his sword down on the desk and said, "C'mon, don't be like that. I'm not gonna kill ya, alright? So be chill! Just, kinda put your hands up! I'd accept a white flag too, if you've got like a handkerchief or somethin'."

Lucille didn't rise to his bait with a witty retort or by just attacking him, like he expected. Actually, she was trembling far too much, and her eyes were bloodshot and glassy. Now that Mataro thought about it, this wasn't right. [*She **was** crying when we got here.*] Wakaiketsu put the sudden stab of guilt into words, [*Not quite a typical couturière, is she?*]

"Hang on... how old are you?" He asked. Somehow that scared Lucille even more, she kind of recoiled, moving her hands as if to cover her body. Mataro barely noticed. He didn't know the kinds of stories REVOCS told about him, how they combined the perverted antics of his youth and his more recent habits into a creature of unbounded lust. That question had a horrible connotation to Lucille that Mataro hadn't even considered.

"W-What?"

"You're younger than me!" He realized. "How? I was fourteen when Ragyo got iced, you can't tell me REVOCS would recruit like, a preteen?"

[*Not recruit, maybe,*] Wakaiketsu said, and Mataro was thinking the same dark thoughts. Kidnapped? Brainwashed? He could imagine what kind of use they might have for a girl like her.

He'd leaned in closer as he was saying this, and now Lucille yelped, "D-Don't fucking *touch* me!" Only, she said it in French, so Mataro didn't understand all.

"What?" *Oh great, does she not even speak Japanese? I just guess I thought they all did since Ragyo did.* "Yo, I'm askin' a question! How the hell did you end up joining REVOCS? You do speak Japanese, right?"

The result of that was only getting her to shout "Don't touch me!" again. Still in French. Mataro pushed himself up to sit on the desk and crossed his arms. He was trying to think of a way to get her to respond, or even to prove that she understood him. Neither he nor Wakaiketsu had any good ideas.

It felt like a minorly annoying time passed to Mataro, but to Lucille it felt like an eon. But it did give her time to study her captor. And as her pulse began to cool from chest-bursting to simply terrified, she found him... remarkably ordinary. She did in fact understand Japanese, and she was high-ranking enough to be clued in that the humans wearing "bonded" kamui were much more autonomous than the REVOCS kind, but seeing really was believing. He didn't look the way she expected, he didn't move the way she expected, and he definitely didn't talk the way she expected. If she didn't know better, she would say he was no different from any other person, except for an absurd degree of arrogance (which wasn't entirely unjustified). In fact, on a symbolic level it made perfect sense that any random shmuck from *the masses* would become a monster given a power never intended for them.

But no, she knew that was just a trick, that he was trying to lull her into a false sense of calm. That the thing boring through her with those eyes like wormholes into hell was whispering something to him, something that amused his primitive, perverted little mind to no end. It didn't really matter what, he had found her, she was in his power, and all there was time left for was one last act of defiance.

But she also knew she was more scared of what he'd do if she didn't speak than of the shame of it. After everything else, what difference did it make?

"I didn't *join*," Lucille spat it out, "I'm not some servant, I-I'm a *couturière*!" She was sure that look in his big, moony eyes was delighted mockery. In truth he didn't know or care how much weight she put on that title. "My father was Director of Marketing for the American subsidiaries and a Kiryuin on his mother's side, and my mother was a squadron captain in the REVOCS flight academy and after that the air force."

"Ohhhh," Mataro mouthed, clearly surprised. "So, you were *born* into it! Then, you really never had a choice, did you?" *How many more like you are there?* He wondered. It wasn't so awful as the kidnapping situation he'd imagined, but this was much, much worse than the ordinary REVOCS convert.

Wakaiketsu had a more positive take on it, [*Good luck we didn't kill her! She's one we can actually deprogram.*]

That perked Mataro up, but he couldn't resist responding, "I dunno... honestly it'd be a mercy to just kill her now. You ever see those shows about the girls who leave Amish country? Always goes rough, they start doing drugs, hang out with a bad crowd, and they get just the worst, tackiest, most uncool tatoos. Ryuko'd cry."

[*Mataro!*] Wakaiketsu got the joke, but, [*You're scaring her!*]

"Oh, right." He held up his hands, "Kidding! I was just kidding, it's not gonna be that bad." She didn't seem much consoled – mostly she was just horrified to actually witness him talking with his kamui. "But seriously, listen, you lucked out. Most of the time when we catch you higher-up types, they get sentenced to life in prison. Can't trust 'em, right? But since you never really had a chance to see the real world or choose REVOCS, you'll go free in a few years' time once they know you don't believe any of the uh... y'know, the whole religion anymore."

"W-what are you saying?" Lucille couldn't believe it. He was so confident that she would lose her faith! How could he be?

"I'm saying," He said, "And I know you don't want to hear this now, but things will work out alright for you. I'm serious, I've seen former REVOCS who got out and are living totally ordinary lives now! It's like," *There's got to be some way I can make her understand*, "It's a war, right? When a war's over, not everyone on the losing side dies. Some of them keep on living, that's how it works. I mean – well – you'll see. But there's no reason for you to be scared, and there's no reason I should have to punch your lights out. Just surrender! I'm taking you prisoner either way."

"No!" Lucille shouted. She put her swordtip back in Mataro's face, as if hoping he would just impale himself. He wasn't too bothered. "Never! I don't know what you're trying to trick me into, but it will *never* work! I'd rather die! And you are a fool if you think an 'ordinary life' is worth anything to me!"

At this point, Mataro should have just incapacitated her. But he felt compelled to at least try to persuade her. *She has no idea what she's missing*, he thought. "Okay, I don't mean like a boring, normal life, you can be whatever you want to be. But..." After a moment's consideration he sighed and said, "Well that's it, there's REVOCS, and then there's the entire rest of the world. It's really not a big part of it."

"It doesn't matter how big your rest of the world is," Lucille sneered, "Why would I *ever* want to live in the filthy, sinful world of humans."

Mataro tried to think of a rational response to that. Anything was better than his gut answer, *Because it's the only one we've got, moron!* But he spotted Yuda gliding in from outside, and so instead said, "Oh hey man," to him.

Yuda's arrival was the last straw for Lucille. Summoning up her final ounce of courage, she thrust her sword right for Mataro's eyes. *Kill him, get killed by this new one*, She thought feverishly, *I'll have done more than anyone thought I would!* Only, Mataro reacted faster than she could see. His sword was suddenly in hand and he rolled backward, sliding off the desk and out of reach with ease. Blinded by rage, Lucille chased after him, swinging wildly.

"Hey... you, uh, busy?" Yuda chuckled. He stayed perched in the window as this very one-sided duel unfolded – ready to strike if he needed to, though it didn't really seem like he did.

*[Don't! Don't kill her!]* Wakaiketsu shouted urgently to Rama.

Rama was immediately exasperated – as usual the two refused to get along. *[What are you doing?]* She groaned.

*[What's it look like?]*

*[It looks like you're playing with your food.]*

*[Wha-]* Wakaiketsu was indignant, *[You don't get it! This girl was born already in REVOCS! We have to at least try to get through to her.]*

*[What difference does it make? You don't have to kill her if you don't want, but don't drag it out.]*

Yuda shrugged at Mataro and stayed put. So Rama relented, *[Just make it quick, okay? Nonon wants us to regroup at the surface, they have Ranketsu on the ropes.]*

*[So you already got the rest of them?]*

*[Please. They'd killed them before we even caught up.]*

While this conversation was carrying on, Mataro stayed one step ahead of Lucille, easily parrying the unfocused blows of a weaker, less skilled, and vastly less confident fighter. That last part about a sinful world reminded him of what Rei had said, back when she tried to kill Satsuki (the first time she tried to kill Satsuki, that was). What had Satsuki said to make her calm down? He tried to remember as best he could, "Look, I know the world ain't perfect, and it seems pretty terrible to you. We've got our problems. But Satsuki and the rest have been doing a really good job fixing things! You'll see, it's been worth it, people are a lot happier now than they were."

Lucille stopped chasing after him just long enough to yell, “Fix? How could *you* fix anything? You’re the most sinful of them all! You have the pride to think that you can fix humanity even though it is fundamentally flawed!”

“Alright, alright, well if that’s what you think still, it’s not like you’ll have a hard life or anything. Former REVOCS usually get plenty of money and help when they’re set free! It’s true!”

“Greed! I don’t need it!”

“Come on! Then fine, you don’t have to be rich, okay? But there must be something you like. You couturières, you’re supposed to be cultured, right? You’re really gonna tell me you never want to listen to your favorite music again? Watch your favorite movie? Eat your favorite food? You’d rather die than do that one more time.”

Again, “That’s just gluttony!”

*[You’ve got to admit, that does sound a bit like gluttony.]*

“Well, I said it wrong then!” Mataro huffed. He had to admit, none of this was likely to persuade her. But he knew in the end she would see what he was trying to say, that there was something in life she was definitely missing as part of REVOCS and she would be much happier once freed from that. He just wasn’t intellectually equipped to express it. “You’re not getting it. Look, you’re a good lookin’ chick, and talented too since they made you a couturière. You’ll be very popular –“

“*LUST!*”

“Not even! I mean friends, family, that kind of personal connection regular people have. You *can’t* say you have a problem with that, huh?”

Lucille went so red it was almost as though her face was glowing. “Bu – y – you – YOU KILLED THEM!” She howled.

“Ah.” Now it was Mataro’s turn to go red. *No, maybe there isn’t anything I can say to make this better.* He looked over at Yuda, but he was remarkably stony faced. *Trying not to laugh at me,* Mataro concluded. So he said to Lucille, “Well, you’ve got me there.” And before she could even react he was right in her face, deftly slicing the glowing straps that held her Ultima Uniform together into pieces. She shouted as it burst off her, and the shock of it instantly knocked her unconscious. As she collapsed, Mataro caught her and laid her down gently. Yuda slid off the window frame and walked over, looking at Mataro with his eyebrows raised and a half-smile in the corner of his mouth. “I really ballsed that one up, huh?”

“Now you see why I don’t even bother,” Yuda said. “Just leave it to the psychologists, that’s their job.”

“Yeah... I dunno, guess I just wanted to have a little ‘Rei moment’ there.”

Yuda laughed, “Well, there’s subtle differences in between the Rei situation and this.”

“I’m beginning to realize that,” Mataro nodded, sheepishly rubbing the back of his head.

“You really killed her family?”

“I think she was referring to the couturières,” Mataro said as he retrieved his other sword from where it had been dug into the wall.

“Mmm,” Yuda nodded, and gently began to lift Lucille up. Anticipating his needs, the lab floor popped open to deploy a thin white robe to wrap her in and some handcuffs. “Rough day for her, huh?”

Mataro shrugged, “Still can’t believe that there’s kids who *grew up* inside of REVOCS. Nobody ever told me.”

“I guess I kinda figured,” Yuda agreed, “It’s a big organization. Still, doesn’t make a difference, does it? We catch ‘em when we can, kill ‘em when we can’t.”

Mataro didn’t have much to say to that. He still thought it was pretty horrible that she had never been given a choice, but what could he say to a guy who’s entire country had been destroyed by REVOCS? “Well, let’s head to the surface?”

But just then, the lights turned off. Suddenly the bright flourescents beams were gone and they were plunged into a shadowy world lit only be the flames outside and the kamui. They both froze, dead silent. Something had gone wrong.

~~~~~

On the surface, Houka had Ranketsu within a few yards of the accelerator. He pressed the attack relentlessly and as they inched ever closer, the floor fell away. Ranketsu had no room to maneuver, it was on a gangplank forcing it right towards the blurry, distorted field in the center.

But suddenly, it made what looked like a serious error. It cut away the ground between itself and Houka with a wide slash of its speartip. The gangplank wasn’t connected to anything else, it fell down into the gloom. And Ranketsu landed on the control platform at the base of the accelerator.

It had found what it was looking for.

“Shiro!” Houka shouted, and Shiro leapt after it, but it was already too late. It punched through a large screen, sending a shower of sparks everywhere.

Houka and Shiro, Izanami and Misaki, all of them felt everything lurch. In an instant, their awareness of where they were vanished, as though the internal contents of their own minds were thrown in front of their eyes. The last thing they saw was Ranketsu pulling forth a massive, pulsing bundle of wires and life-fibers from within the machine. Its sleeve was unwound, lacy threads creeping out, touching the frayed ends of their life-fibers.

As far as Ranketsu’s combat capabilities went, they had prepared for everything. But it had another ability, one they didn’t forsee. And their assumptions about REVOCS’ plan of attack were flawed from the start. The couturières were the distraction, Ranketsu the one that would hack the system. And the facility’s computer hardware wasn’t the target of the hack.

*They were.*

# Dimensions of the Mind

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

Sirens were blaring in the distance, dull and indistinct. Houka's fingertips squeezed on his forehead, trying to massage away a powerful aching. They didn't do any good.

Shiro was standing beside Satsuki's chair, and he too was clutching at his head in aggrieved pain. The rest of the student council stopped mid-conversation, and glanced between the two of them with worried frowns.

"Hey, you good?" Nonon asked.

"I..." Houka was going to answer that he felt fine, but he couldn't be sure even that was safe before he figured out where he was and what was happening. He knew something had *just* happened, but everything felt hazy and he couldn't recall what it was. That alone was alarming – whatever had happened was very bad indeed. It felt so wrong, but trying to figure out what was wrong about it made his head hurt even more, sharp and violent like a knife in his brain.

But the feeling danger and his sheer terror at not remembering something overcame that pain. No doubt about it, this was the Honnouji council chamber. The dark, vaulted ceiling, the velvet drapes and carpets, the piano sitting off to the side and those odd, asymmetric light fixtures. And everyone was in their old places: Uzu with his feet on the table, Ira paused in the middle of pacing the room, Nonon recumbent in a pile of stuffed animals. He and Shiro were even wearing their old Goku uniforms, though Shiro seemed to have taken his uncle's place at Satsuki's side. Together they formed a little arc, and at its center, in her throne, with her legs cross elegantly beneath a teacup and saucer there was Satsuki. With her perpetual scowl and her long silky hair and her old pre-Junketsu uniform and everything. And no Ryuko.

The pieces began popping into Houka's head and with each one his headache intensified until he thought it might pop too. "You're an illusion!" He finally blurted to Nonon. She didn't so much as blink, just looking at him as if she was bored. Tacit confirmation, it made Houka shudder and Shiro's eyes went wide.

"Oh, fuck me!" He exclaimed to Houka, "Ranketsu!" It was coming together for him just as quickly as it was for Houka. That's right! Just as Rosuketsu had "spoken" with Saiban during the Battle of Krakatoa by melding their life-fibers together and creating some kind of direct telepathic link, Ranketsu had melded itself to Izanami and Misaki's life-fibers that were woven throughout the lab. Houka was horrified and sat there stock still, mouth open, staring at nothing as he worked through the implications.

It was a textbook case for how his mind, deeply attuned to his vocation, handled a crisis the same way he handled everything else: with the scientific method. First, the question: *What exactly has happened to us?* Then, assessment of the background information, which lead him to the most likely conclusion being that this was direct interference with the process of his mind. Saiban had

described it as Rosuketsu “showing him things”, and Houka pictured that as almost a direct interference with the nerves that brought sight, sound, and touch to his brain. More than a dream, less that being transported into a new reality. In which case this whole illusion might be under Ranketsu’s control.

*And if it can do that, what else can it do? And why did it show me Honnouji? Why not just take the knowledge it wants right away? He didn’t have the slightest idea what it all meant, and that lead him to the very strong probability that it was all a trick that he didn’t understand. They need us to reveal our secrets. That must be it. Ranketsu is constantly connected with its siblings, I’m sure, so anything it learns **must** go to them as well, and then they’ll tell it to all of REVOCS. They could get so much more than just how to build kamui! They would learn how to build **hybrids**! They would learn everything we know about them, and his heart started beating with alarming strength, they could learn who Ryuko’s parents really were. And they could tell the world! The scientific method didn’t have an answer for that. If the world learned, no, if the world learned they *knew* that and covered it up, it would be the end of everything. Houka, for once, felt totally outclassed. How am I supposed to do this without Misaki? He looked to Shiro, He doesn’t have Izanami either! Without them, what are we supposed to do!*

As if in response, his laptop pinged. Before it had some random tabs open – a spreadsheet, a webpage, and old coding assignment – but all those placeholders vanished in favor of a simple black field with white text.

*> Don’t be alarmed. Yet. This mess could be a whole lot worse.*

Houka’s fingers flew, burning headache completely forgotten. Relief cracked his skull and poured in cool, soothing water, and just like that he was back to himself.

*I take it you have a plan. <*

That response skipped a lengthy “is that really you” conversation. Misaki would appreciate that, and it also gave her the opportunity to confirm it really was her by responding:

*> Dozens, actually. I doubt any of them will work though.*

Houka turned to look out the window, he felt compelled to do so the same way he’d felt compelled to look at his laptop and see Misaki’s messages. She was trying to show him something. He got up and walked over, and Shiro followed close behind. He was looking intently at the old tablet he’d used to oversee the sewing shop – a clunky armor-plated slab like most Honnouji tech. He showed it to Houka wordlessly and Houka read off a text conversation between him and Izanami that was just a little longer than his with Misaki and said basically the same thing. They locked eyes and nodded, the unspoken agreement that, *“Alright, it really is you. Now we can try to get out of here.”*

The windows of council chamber stretched from floor to ceiling and made a kind of arrowhead shape, a narrow arc with a point in the center. They crept up, curiosity tinged with trepidation. It all felt so real, who was to say how far this universe went? “Rggh! I can’t believe we didn’t see this!” Shiro fumed, , “Because of course! Why *would* they bother downloading data from behind all our layers of encryption and killware, when they could just take the knowledge right from the source! And if they can do this –,” He waved his arm around wildly, “– Then who knows what else –,”

“-My *God!*” Houka exclaimed. A battle was raging in the arena below. All the forces of Honnouji were surging together towards the main gates, filling the ground with their lockstep formations and

the air with their unison stomping and chants. The sheer numbers clearly outweighed the true student body of Honnouji because even now more ranks were emerging from the within the academy, but what really struck Houka was their variety and inhuman precision. There must have been at least thirty different kinds, from what he could spot. The good-old-fashioned one-stars with their stark white goku uniforms were the most common, but there were plenty others and not even purely Honnouji students. DTRs and modern League troops with their gas masks alongside Nonon's marching band with their noise beam weapons and even some ultima uniforms. What Houka came to understand was that each had its own function and executed it with single-minded focus. Ranks of gunners took a knee and opened fire, and before them charging close-combat troops ducked into columns so the bullets just whizzed past. But what were they charging towards?

Whatever they were attacking was obscured amidst their teeming rows, all Houka could see was that it was flinging their bodies away with reckless abandon as it charged through. That certainly felt familiar. And when the thing finally barreled its way into view by bashing straight through a block of soldiers, Houka wasn't surprised to see the shape of a woman. At first, he really did think it was a sort of "shadow Ryuko", it certainly moved at the same lightning speed, but on closer inspection he knew that it was some incarnation of Ranketsu. It was made from the deep, dark navy blue of Ranketsu's robes, a silhouette of a woman who was tall and statuesque, clearly Ranketsu's host. Its hair and thin bodice drifted off it in a trail of inky black smoke as it zipped around, creating a wide area of fallen bodies in which it stood free. Bullets and rockets zipped off its body and even powerful noise beams only slowed it down.

But from behind it, two more women chased after it and they were even easier to recognize. One short and blonde wearing a thin red combat skin with a cape that split into eight pointed tendrils, the other tall and stick-thin, with a long neck hunched and set like a predatory bird and smooth semispherical shoulder plates. Houka momentarily forgot all about the situation and excitedly shook Shiro's shoulder. "Look, that's Izanami and Misaki!" He said with a grin.

"It... it would appear so," Shiro looked nervous, as though they were looking down into a giant bonfire that might explode in their faces at any moment. *And he's got a point*, Houka thought, *This isn't, or at least may not be, just a pretty picture I'm being shown. That may really be Ranketsu down there, and I may seriously not want it to notice me right now.* Shiro said, "But what's that supposed to mean? Is that really them?"

Houka had to drag himself away from watching. Misaki leapt right into the fray, fighting hand to hand with Ranketsu. Izanami paused a moment to pick some of the fallen troopers up. Others that had appeared dead took heart seeing her and rose too, and once a new phalanx had been resurrected Izanami joined the fight too. Eventually he said, "Good point. We need more information."

Houka hurried back over to his computer and sent a few queries.

*What am I seeing right now? <*

*Where am I really? <*

*> My living core.*

*> Right now, you are interfacing with my living core and not my clothes component as you normally do.*



Misaki and Izanami were beings in composite – the clothes component, the living core spun out of excess life-fibers from those clothes, and then the many terabytes of computer that the living core controlled like programmer with a million fingers. \*

> *When Ranketsu made contact, you went unconscious.*

> *My clothes component is much like the other kamui and like with Saiban, Ranketsu is using it to*

There was a slight delay

> *Speak with me.*

> *I didn't know what would happen if your mind was exposed to that, so I disconnected my clothes component from you.*

> *It's as if you took me off and wore my core instead, so to speak.*

> *And Izanami did the same with Shiro.*

> *I'm sorry, it must be unpleasant, I doubt it feels like I'm really there.*

> *But at least here I know you're safe.*

> *Well, within a margin of error anyway.*

*I'm speaking with you over a computer right now <*

> *No, it's still our same mental link, my living core is made of my life-fibers remember?*

*No I mean to me this is a text conversation on a computer <*

*I am in the Honnouji student council chamber, typing messages to you and reading your responses <*

*It's like a dream, but too real, too consistent <*

Even as he wrote, Houka was watching with full clarity the way his hands moved, the way the new text came in. In real dreams, little details like that got blurred over. Shiro was watching over his shoulder (partially, he was also talking to Izanami) and he nodded and said, “So she doesn't know what this experience is like for us either, huh? That means this illusion isn't her doing.”

“Not directly, anyway. I'm formulating a hypothesis.”

> *I have a hypothesis.*

Shiro chuckled, “Ah, what timing. Looks like it really is her.”

> *Ryuko has said that she and Senketsu have a 'shared imagination'.*

> *That's a very apt description, wouldn't you say?*

*Yes <*

> *And from that we confirmed that kamui's minds have a subconscious, like a human.*

*> Up until now even I wouldn't have known how the different parts of me were divided between my clothes and core .*

*>But Ranketsu is speaking with my conscious mind, so we know that it is in the clothes.*

*> Which means that I may have put you in closer contact with my subconscious instead.*

*>Sound right to you?*

*Something like that <*

“Oh, this form of communication is way too slow!” Houka blurted, “I have like, several dozen questions and we could have gotten through it all in seconds!”

“Mm,” Shiro murmured in agreement, “Then just keep it to essentials. That’s what we’re doing.”

“Huh! Quite,” And so he started with the thing that gave him the most skepticism.

*But then, if your consciousness is under Ranketsu's control, how can you communicate with me at all? <*

*> Shit, you made me to be a good multitasker!*

*> Don't sweat what I'm doing, I'm more than capable of saving processing power for you even now.*

*> Let's just try and make sense of what you're experiencing.*

*Oh. Of course, what am I thinking <*

So Houka related, in brief, what he'd seen so far both within the council chamber and without. If only he could have worn Misaki again, he could have instantly communicated so much detail that mere words wouldn't get across. And while Misaki's messages suggested that even in this extremity she wasn't panicking, he wished that he could read her feelings and confirm that.

When he was finished, Misaki messaged:

*> I need you to go and count off the soldiers in a single rank in the battle to confirm my new hypothesis.*

*> Just a simple one, with one-stars.*

Houka picked up his laptop and hurried to comply.

*Ten one-stars in a row <*

*Then a boxing club member <*

*Then two band members with trumpets <*

*Another boxing club member, then the pattern repeats <*

*> Then that cinches it!*

> *That pattern is the basic level of all our cybersecurity.*

> *Ten one-stars, ten encryption gates.*

Encryption gates were files or links nestled within the kamuis' data grid that blocked access with tremendously long and constantly changing passcodes.

> *Which Ranketsu has been overwhelming with an unbelievable amount of raw data.*

> *And for every ten of those, one of our standard pieces of killware.*

Killware meaning a kind of counter-attacking malware meant to overheat and explode a hacker's computer.

> *And those only really slow it down.*

> *Which means that what you're seeing, that's Ranketsu breaking into our servers. All those soldiers, they represent all the layers of defenses. And where you see us, that's the place where our attention lies.*

> *You see it as Honnouji and our contest as a battle because that's your subconscious, well ours, trying to make sense of things!*

"Amazing!" Houka blurted.

*That's it, it must be! <*

*It's only natural that it would look like Honnouji. <*

*Our servers are our fortress. <*

*And Ranketsu is a single powerful foe besieging it like Ryuko did. <*

*But you don't see any of this do you? <*

> *No it's just code to me*

Houka watched Misaki's human body engage in a lightning quick dervish of hand-to-hand combat. He tried to picture it as what it represented – Misaki directly rewriting her encryption at lightning speed, trying to outpace the rate that Ranketsu could break it – but he saw what he saw.

> *And to Ranketsu too, I've never encountered a threat like this.*

> *It's like it's creating raw electrical impulses from nothing and can create exactly the effect it desires.*

> *Clearly it understands the code both as physical circuits and transistors and as a language, I could take a lesson or two.*

*That doesn't sound good for us though <*

*Do we have a chance? <*

> *Of stopping it completely? No.*

*> But what it's looking for is in the core with you, so it will have to break through every defense we can throw at it. \**

*> And by then Nonon and the others will hopefully make it back to the surface and rescue us.*

*> And if not, well then at last resort I'll disconnect my clothes component entirely.*

*> You'll return to consciousness, then we fight again.*

*> It will take some finesse, but we've been in tougher situations.*

*> We'll pull it out in the end.*

But Houka muttered to himself, "What? No, no no no no,"

*But if you do that, then Ranketsu will have the run of the system and it'll take everything! <*

*Even secrets it wasn't looking for! <*

He made sure to use punctuation, to make her understand that he was emphatic about this.

"What are you guys talking about?" Shiro asked, coming up to look over Houka's shoulder. After reading the exchange he said, "Well, she does have a point. That might be the only way to save our lives."

"But don't you see, that would be so much worse than just letting it have the kamui chamber plans! If it learns that –," At this point he was interrupted by another message from Misaki.

*> Yeah well you got a better idea?*

*> I won't try that unless I absolutely have to, don't worry.*

*> I'm sorry, but I think you'll just have to sit tight and see how it all plays out.*

Houka began to type a message in protest, but he knew that though she seemed calm, Misaki was struggling. She would never accept that she might lose unless it was more than truth, a certainty. So he wouldn't make things any harder for her than necessary.

*Okay, thank you for everything. <*

*Let me know if I can help. <*

Shiro crept up beside him, keeping a wary eye on the other council members and Satsuki. "I know that look. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking," Houka said, touching his forehead (the headache had returned almost the moment he broke contact with Misaki). "That if this is indeed a sort of collective subconscious, then we may be more powerful here than we think."

"*Wha...*" Shiro shook his head. "Houka, I know you don't want to hear this, so let me say first: *I get it. We fucked up! Don't think it doesn't bother me too because it does. But I don't think we fucked up in a fixable way, not this time.*" Houka was about to protest but he went on,

“Yeah if Ryuko or Satsuki was here, they’d say fight on, but we’re *not* Satsuki and we’re definitely not Ryuko.”

“Right,” Houka chuckled, “If we were Ryuko, we’d probably just walk out there and punch Ranketsu in the face. And that’d probably work for her too.”

Shiro went on, “This is the enemy’s territory, who knows what else it’s capable of! If our kamui are just barely holding Ranketsu back, what chance to do we have?” He sighed, “You see? And I don’t think the situation will be the end of the world, anyway. Nonon will save us, and we have a backup plan if she doesn’t. Ranketsu getting hold of the kamui chamber plans will be bad sure – we’ll never hear the end of it – but even if it gives them to the Americans or someone do you really think our friends would be stopped by that? After everything we’ve been through? I doubt it.”

Houka smiled to himself. This defeat would nag at Shiro for a long time, that much was obvious already from how his hands were shaking. He wanted it to be over as quickly as possible, then he would dive into making sure it never happened again. That was his way, they both understood that. But it just wouldn’t work for Houka. “The mind of a kamui is a powerful thing. Remember when Mako was pulled into Junketsu? Remember what she said that was like? Where did she go? Remember that Ryuko said that in her true form, she and Senketsu can create imaginary spaces that feel real? I hypothesize that is because they *are* real, that they are pocket dimensions that exist within a kamui’s multidimensional body. And that we are in one of those at this very moment.”

“You’ve got no reason to think that. It’s more likely that this is like a very vivid dream. Our bodies are where we left them in the waking world, but Mako was pulled in,” Shiro said. The other council members were watching with apparently full patience and zero curiosity – as if they had accepted their unreality and were just along for the ride. They eyed them warily though.

“And yet Ryuko has to kill her physical body and appears to be able to return *before* she left. There’s no pattern, our sample size is too small,” Houka got up and walked over to stand at the table between Uzu and Nonon’s couches.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Perform an experiment.”

He had their attention now. Satsuki set down her tea and in a tone of easy command said, “Inumuta? You have something to report?”

“Er, yes, Lady Satsuki,” Houka had decided to test his surroundings, see how far they would play their role. He tabbed his laptop to one of the pages that had been open and began reading. The words were already there, and he realized as he read that it was describing the progress of the fight against Ranketsu, translated into the contextualization of Honnouji. “Honoutown has been lost, and our precinct buildings there are burning”, “There are still pockets of resistance in the One-Star apartments and Two-Star villas, but the enemy blew past them”, “The enemy now faces our full strength in the academy arena”, that sort of thing. After that last time he added, “And if you ask me, if we had these numbers at the Great Festival, we probably wouldn’t have had nearly as much trouble with Ragyo.”

“Mhmm,” Satsuki hum chuckled. “I take your meaning. In the end Ryuko alone was Ragyo’s match, so two more kamui would have tipped the scales considerably. Especially ones with resilience against mental attack, as Izanami and Misaki do.”

Houka's eyebrows raised and he elbowed Shiro, "You see? I was certain from the start that they are essentially props in this world, but when speaking to them, they aren't just pictures of them from the past... Perhaps they represent something, some aspect of the psyche."

"Perhaps, or some part of the inner working of the computer. It's interesting, her tone of voice it's like, more similar to how Satsuki talks now. Softer, you know."

An explosion outside rocked the building. For the first time the illusory student council members shared nervous glances. Ira said, "We should be out there. An enemy at our gates and we don't go out to face them?"

*What could he represent, pride?*

"This again?" Uzu groaned, "Does she ever get tired?"

"Moron, don't you pay attention? It's not Ryuko this time," Nonon said with a roll of her eyes. Houka and Shiro shrugged at each other. That conversation didn't really tell them much of anything.

But then Satsuki said, "That's true, we are faced with a much more dangerous enemy today. What is she after, Inumuta? You must have some idea."

Houka almost started to answer, but something gave him pause. "Why, I suppose she means to destroy us, Lady Satsuki," He answered, purposefully evading the true answer. Why should she want to know, in fact why didn't she already know, like she already knew about Misaki and Izanami?

"Oh, certainly, I agree that this is the enemy kamui's overall goal. But why come *here*?" She fixed him with a look combining the authority of the old Satsuki with the trust of the new. "*I am counting on you,*" She seemed to say and Houka again felt the urge to answer.

Shiro was giving her a suspicious eye too, which only furthered the connections Houka was making. Could it be, was it possible that Misaki had been wrong? Was it possible that Ranketsu *had* made it past her? Houka could imagine that, after all they knew nothing about what Ranketsu was capable of. It was even possible that he hadn't been speaking to the real Misaki, who could say? Houka's shoulders crept up, cramping his aching head as he weighed it up.

"I... I must admit that I don't know, Lady Satsuki."

But Satsuki's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You do know," She realized, "You know, and you won't tell me." It seemed more like she was hurt than offended. "Then, it must be serious indeed. Is there something... something that you feel guilty of? I sense something weighing on your conscience."

"Y-yes, well..." Houka trailed off. Shiro had been watching all this go on nervously and he deserved an explanation. So Houka quickly reached into his desk, pulling out a notepad and a pen. This was an interesting discovery itself; he used to keep a pen in there but his notepad in his laptop case so it was as if he had willed it into existence. He quickly scrawled something out and passed it to Shiro *\*I don't trust them\**

Shiro read, nodded, and took the pen to write *\*Let's go to the hall, staggered\**. When Houka nodded, Shiro strode off, saying that he was going to survey the sewing club. After a

moment, Houka too headed for the hall, saying that he was going to use the restroom and would come back with a clearer head.

Past the velvet curtains, he found Shiro waiting. The entry hall was dim and narrow and had gloomy vaulted ceilings. They hurried down it until well out of earshot and then leaned very close, as if the walls had ears too. “Okay, what is it? Not happy with the results of your experiment?”

“No, no I am not. There’s something off about Satsuki, did you notice? The others seem rather paper thin caricatures, but her. I could feel the spark of intelligence behind her, couldn’t you?” Houka said quickly.

“Satsuki’s intelligent,” Shiro shrugged, “It’s a good replica.” That sounded dismissive but what he meant was “*Go on*”.

“She knew everything you’d expect her to, except the secrets Ranketsu had come for. And she wanted me to tell her. Shiro, do you think it’s possible that our kamui were wrong? That Ranketsu has already made it past their defenses? I do. It is attacking the computer systems and their clothes components at once, why can’t it be in three places?” His head felt like it was going to split in two but Houka pressed on. “The computer, the clothes, and the core, it could be that it has struck at all of them at once. It’s just a hunch, but I believe that it is already in here, that it has assumed the form of Satsuki, and that in some way we don’t fully understand *we* are essential to the last line of defense. It is trying to *trick us* into giving it the secrets it came for!” He realized that sounded frantic, groundless, but something about it all had felt so wrong, especially the way he had *wanted* to tell Satsuki everything. Ranketsu would know his instinctive reaction if she asked him a question, everyone in the world knew the depths of loyalty she inspired. And it would use that. “Also, does your head hurt really awfully?”

Shiro thought about this for a moment. “You really have no basis for this. Why should Ranketsu need us to willingly give anything up? But I will admit, it is odd that that was what she wanted to talk about, and it is odd the way she phrased it. Alright, well I’ll grant you this much: it won’t do us any harm to be safe. And if you’re right, then all we need to do is not mention any of the secrets which our confined to our circle alone. If it needs to hear them from our mouths, then we just won’t speak them.”

“Right, yes,” Houka nodded. *Oh, thank goodness, at least I don’t need to persuade him of it too.*

“So there’s the kamui construction chamber, obviously.”

“Right, yes, the kamui construction chamber,” Something shifted in Houka’s head as he said it. It was a very physical sensation, almost like something dropped. “And the hybridization device.” Again, something shifted behind his forehead, rolling back towards the base of his neck.

“Right, right,” Shiro agreed, “That would be harmful in the hands of the enemy.”

“Those, and –,” But in the moment before he said the final, worst secret – Ryuko’s true parentage – something else clicked in Houka’s head.

*It’s him!*

In a single smooth motion a knife appeared in his hand, materialized through sheer will, and he reared back and jammed it wildly into Shiro's face. His mask shattered in a rain of glass and blood and he screamed.

"OH!" Houka gasped. The knife's handle immediately slipped from his grasp and as Shiro fell it went with him, protruding from his head. Houka rushed to catch Shiro's collapsing body and sunk to his knees. For a brief moment, he couldn't accept the reality of what he was seeing. He had really done that?

But then he noticed something else. Shiro's body was too light. Hollow. And this wasn't blood. Clear, viscous fluid bubbled around the knife blade still stuck in his eye socket. It was orange, bright and sticky like honey. He knew at once his hunch was right.

So Houka clenched his teeth and twisted the knife still deeper. "You underestimate me," He seethed. Shiro's one remaining eye glowed with rage. "You think. I would fall. For this! You want my knowledge? You can't have it! It's mine!" Houka's voice was contorted into a snarl he had never used before. "I collected it! I will decide who gets it! AND I WILL NOT ALLOW IT TO HURT MY FRIENDS!"

Shiro's body lunged up, shedding clothes and skin like tissue paper. Now it was merely a mannequin in his shape, made of glowing orange fibers woven together and pulsing. It raised its elbows high and with overwhelming strength slammed its hands into the sides of Houka's temples. Houka howled as the pain in his head ramped up to overwhelm him, to wash over his senses and leave him unable to even think of anything else. Behind the puppet replica of Shiro the darkness seemed to rush in, growing ever deeper and darker like the crushing depths of the sea.

~~~~~

Sirens were blaring in the distance, dull and indistinct. Houka's fingertips squeezed on his forehead, trying to massage away a powerful aching. They didn't do any good.

He jolted up in his chair, looking around with wide, panicked eyes. He was back in the council chamber. Soroi had replaced Shiro, taking his usual place by Satsuki's side. But other than that, everything was exactly the same.

"No..."

He was right back where he started. Worse off, actually. His suspicions had been right, Ranketsu was in here with him. And that meant, as much as he didn't want to admit it, that he was back to square one. He'd been worried about Satsuki acting oddly, but it was Shiro, the real fake, that had acted *exactly* the way he'd expected him to! The facts began to align now. Yes, Ranketsu had been able to mimic Shiro so well that even he couldn't tell until it was nearly too late. It knew more about him than any mission briefing could have possibly explained, especially one given to a creature that didn't talk.

Yes, and that was because Ranketsu was already inside his head! That headache, that horrible splitting pain, that was there *because* Ranketsu was rooting around in there. Houka shuddered at that realization. And that meant that the strange feeling of something moving in his head, the thing that had tipped him off at last, that must have been the moment when Ranketsu *stole* the schematics for making the kamui construction chamber and hybridization device from him! It was as if it read his direct train of thoughts. It knew what to make Shiro do because he thought about how Shiro would probably react while talking to him, of course. But it needed him to call the plans to the



forefront of his mind before it could collect them. Houka didn't have any proof of that, of course, but he knew it anyway.

*But then, I've already given it exactly what it wanted to know! Small consolation that he had kept Ryuko's secret safe, he'd failed the mission! And what now? If it fooled me once, what else can it do? I thought I knew what was happening, knew I was at least in connection with Misaki and that the very space I'm in was at least neutral towards me. But it **all** might be under Ranketsu's control! Outwardly Houka still looked totally calm, but inside the panic was squeezing in on him. Will I ever get out of here? Is there anything I can trust?*

"Hey, you good?" Nonon asked again, but Houka just ignored her. *I need to make contact with Misaki again, make **certain** it's her. Now, before Ranketsu tries anything else. If it's really her, then I at least stand a chance.*

*The situation has changed. I need you to do something for me. <*

*> What's wrong?*

Immediately, the pressure building behind Houka's forehead vanished again. That was a very good sign, he managed a thin and uncertain smile. But he needed to be sure.

*I need you to restore my connection with your clothes component. <*

*It's the only way I can be sure it's really you. <*

*> I really don't think that's a good idea.*

*Are you saying you can't? <*

A brief pause, then:

*> Just a moment.*

*Well, there it is. It was only a hunch that made him think this would work, and just like that Misaki was agreeing. Agreeing to do exactly what, I don't know. But something is going to happen, something which she thought I shouldn't be exposed to. What will it be? Will it be hard for me to understand? Or even impossible? Will I get any warni-*

~~~~~

It felt like he had just blinked, and all of a sudden he was in freefall. A momentary flicker of his eyes he was wheeling through the air, tumbling head over heels. He gasped, and the air escaped his mouth in a white mist. And when he tried to suck in another breath, nothing came in. And as he wheeled around and saw the curvature of the Earth, a perfect smooth arc haloed by a thin blue band of atmosphere, Houka realized he wasn't falling through the air, no, he was tumbling through the vacuum of space!

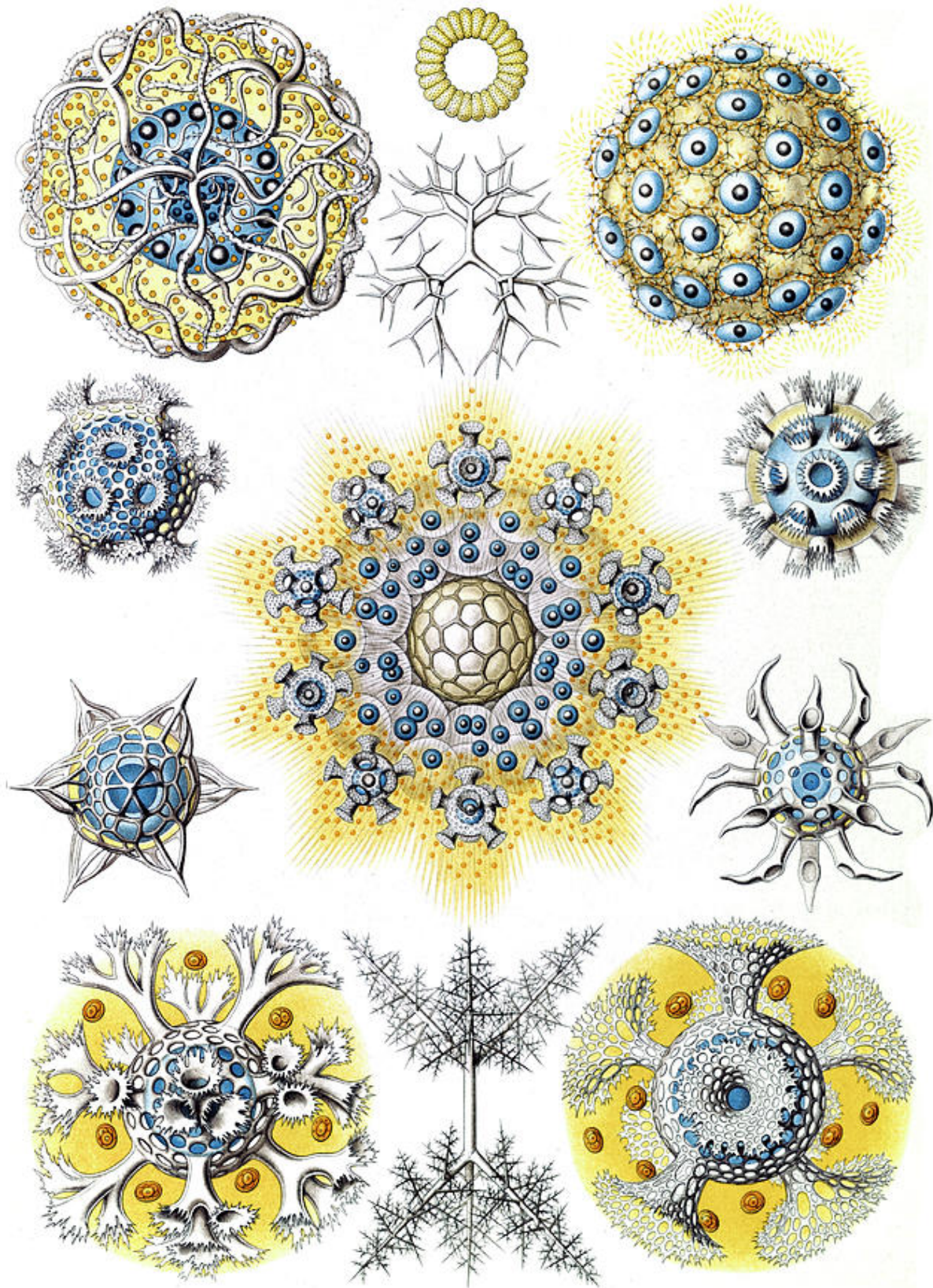
Going to space, seeing breathtaking sight of Earth in its full scale and glory, was one of those items on Houka's bucket list. But not like this. Inside of a space shuttle, surrounded by life-support systems and scientific instruments, it would have been a new pinnacle of his accomplishments at the research complex. But instead, it was like being struck by a tidal wave; disorienting, terrifying, and sure to kill him in mere seconds.

And there was no point debating the reality of it this time. It was horribly, horribly real. A full-on survival panic struck Houka's brain, and he thrashed around, trying to right himself and stop spinning. It didn't work – there was nothing to grab onto or kick against - but that was when his hands brushed up against something floating in front of him. He grabbed it. A long, fleshy cord made of something gelatinous and translucent, it wound around in the space in front of him. From within, a dull glow illuminated it – it was studded with a chain of crystals. They were barely covered by the clear flesh and which twinkled with multicolored light. Houka was transfixed by the sight of it, there was no question that it was totally alien. But he also realized that this thing was his lifeline, and so he tugged on it and using both hands pulled a portion of it straight. His own body jerked and spun weightlessly with it.

*It's connected to me!* Houka traced it up to where it vanished into his chest. Right above his heart, which was pumping faster and faster as he rapidly ran out of oxygen, it plunged into his chest with only the finest seam, as though it weren't even there. He jiggled it experimentally – yes, it really did seem to ignore his skin. He could lift it, watch it slide up his skin, push it down and watch as more of it was pressed in until it emerged from his abdomen. *It's as if it was on another plane of existence. What is it?* But despite how clearly unnatural it was, Houka didn't dare try to rip it out. In fact, the idea that it was a threat didn't even cross his mind. Now that he had stopped spinning, he was critically aware that he had only a few seconds of time left until he either asphyxiated or Misaki pulled him back. And there was so much he needed to see.

He was far from alone in orbit. Space was alive, teeming with life. Huge shapes, dizzyingly complex beings with radial, hollow lattices for bodies and nebulous, multicolored wings or fins or rings protruding at irregular angles. *Life-fibers!* Houka was thrilled, *I've crossed into a dimension in which they can be seen!*

Once, he had generated an image for Ryuko of what shape her life-fibers would take if they burst forth from within her body and assumed a natural orientation. A creature whose size was difficult to grasp, woven together from thick cords and thin laces of life-fibers. And these beings, which bloomed from the Earth out to the horizon, were just like that, *Oh, only so much more alive! We thought that image was complete, but it was just a skeleton!* He knew this was only a fraction of what Ryuko saw when in her true form, just a single slice of it, but still, *This is it! This is Ryuko's 'Spirit World'! The world I wanted Ranketsu to tell me about!* His eyes were wide and bulging, not just from the lack of oxygen, and he laughed soundlessly in delirious elation as he watched the entire universe come alive before him.



There were so many, so huge and alien beyond his wildest imagination, that Houka had no time to process much of what he was seeing. The battle on the shore of Hokkaido was there, with the many REVOCS Ultima Uniforms, machines, and beasts each represented as little tendrils descending from the depths of space to a tiny pinprick of light on the surface. The kamui were in

their midst, far greater things that plucked the lights one by one off the sea, soaking them up on their wide wings. Houka couldn't tell who was who, he was only left with a confused impression of their huge bodies. They had cores in the same radial, lattice structure as their prey, but with bodies built around them, bilaterally symmetrical things with what looked like necks and tails, possibly even heads and limbs. Huge animals, transparent and gossamer, some wide or tall and others thin and serpentine, they resembled no earthly creature. And above them all, one even more massive spread itself, with wings wide enough to encompass the entire battlefield.

*Ryuko.*

Her Houka recognized, and it was she that filled his clenching heart with a burst of sublime emotion that made his imminent suffocation matter less. Here was a fully realized being, with skin an opaque and glittering crimson, scales or perhaps feathers running across it with an opalescent blue luster, and a long snarling snout filled with sharp teeth. Oh, sure there were still parts that defied explanation, for instance the many long eyestalks erupting from her like mushrooms. But what Houka thought was, *Everything else is totally alien and here she is, not just creature of Earth but one from the human imagination.* A dragon, or halfway there anyway. He could practically hear Ryuko say, "Well fuck it, if I'm gonna be an inhuman monster, then I'm gonna be the biggest, most magnificent monster of all! If anyone ever sees me in that form, they won't be terrified, they'll be amazed!"

*A human imprint on the universe. Yes, that's what she is. And she's going to win!* It was like standing before the gates of Honnouji at the start of the last battle, that long dormant feeling of faith, surpassing logic. What winning in this cosmic struggle against the life-fibers meant, how she would do it, he didn't know and didn't need to.

There was so much else to see that Houka barely registered: Senketsu was out there, orbited by the partially integrated remains of Shinra Koketsu. And the life-fiber network itself formed the backdrop stretching out to the stars. And in the far north something huge was rising, casting multicolored light over the horizon. Ryuko and the fight at Hokkaido was what he noticed first, and what he noticed next was what was going on right around him.

He was in the midst of the life-fibers themselves, though they were so large that there remained a great distance of empty space around him. Between the Earth and where he floated, there were the five kamui that were at the research complex. His vision was beginning to grow bleary, black creeping in on the edges, and they all bled together into a shoal that stretched out over the earth. But there was something else; dozens of long cords of transparent flesh like the one which anchored him, stretched past him into the depths of space. He whirled around and crashing down towards him came a being like a living mountain.

It was another being of latticework and light, but this time tapered to a sharpened point, almost like a proboscis. As if that proboscis point was lifted from the surface of a planet and stretched like putty the rest of its "body" was roughly spherical, and was comprised of many layers of shiny shell, black and glossy, twinkling with rainbow reflections and dotted with clusters of spikes and towers like living cities. Around it, flat plates of deep blue nebula stretched out, pulsing as waves of new material (particles? light? raw energy?) were ejected from rows of fleshy gill-like protusions along its sides. Houka struggled to grasp the scale of it, even the tip of its needle was as far from him as the clouds were above the surface of the earth, but he could *feel* it slowly approaching. And the cords which attached to the kamui were emerging from right below the proboscis tip, yes, it was all coming together now. *That's Ranketsu! And those tentacles it's*



*lashing out towards the kamui, that's how its attacking their minds! Which means that that one is Izanami and this one, the one I'm attached to... is Misaki.*

He looked down and saw her, though it was a struggle to keep his eyes open now. The bodies of the kamui appeared, in this dimension, as towering creatures and Misaki in particular had a shape that was vaguely crescent shaped. In the center she had a central core much like the others: this close up Houka was blown away by the immensity, the geometric complexity of it. It was like a vibrant crystal garden, with shapes that were almost recognizable – the razor-thin swallowtails of gypsum, the layered cubes of bismuth, the lumpy effervescence of malachite, these shapes and more were arrayed on an outer layer perforated by many holes, through which an open interior could be seen. And in there, a sort of solar-system in miniature, spinning orbs of raw life-fibers, emitting dancing light. In the center, one that was larger was silvery and reflective like a mirror, and when the others cast light on it images flashed by, too fast and too many for Houka to pick any out. *This is her heart*, Houka concluded (again without any proof, though he was sure of it) *Or her brain. Both, really.*

Spires rose from the lattice shell, taller than skyscrapers. Clouds of bright blue energy crackled around them, and life-fibers spooled out from their pinnacles to make up the rest of the body. Houka saw now, up close, that what he thought was gelatinous flesh was in fact a glowing corona of light surrounding Misaki's real flesh, or rather the living light of life-fibers itself, a shimmering molten material that created great cords like blood vessels, flow and intertwining. Unlike Ryuko, there were gaps yet unfilled in the flat and broad form of Misaki, giving her that transparent, almost larval appearance. And yet Houka couldn't help but be amazed by the immensity, the waves of multicolored pattern like tapestry across Misaki's surface. When he saw the sun rising or setting, he often tried to wrap his mind around the fact that it was the planet spinning which he was seeing, and to picture how something so huge could move. Now he could see it for himself, see how those vast finlike appendages which curved forward (he guessed forward, because that side was where all the eyestalks were) ponderously swept back and forth and yet covered terribly large distances with each stroke. They moved, however, because Misaki struggled. Ranketsu's attacking tendrils were sinking into her, wrapping around, binding the great beast. And Houka instinctively knew that if that proboscis reached her, that would be the end of everything.

His heart went out, he *needed* to help her escape, and yet at the same time he felt a peculiar dizzy feeling, a sort of sickness that wasn't caused by how lightheaded he was becoming. He knew this was Misaki, both from logic and from the same feeling of innate connection he always felt with her. But he just couldn't believe it, not really. She was a person, not... *this!* She had a voice, and a face, they spent long nights reading together and talking incessantly about so much beyond their scientific endeavors. It just didn't make sense. *And this is what Ranketsu is showing her?* He remembered how quickly Ryuko had changed the subject when she saw the image of her true form. With this strange, surreal dread he was now feeling, he understood why. *How does someone come back from this? How can Misaki go back to normal, how can I not see her as this thing? How does Ryuko do it?*

He was at last reaching the end of his rope. The edges of his vision were fading and he could no longer real move his limbs. But at the same time, the cord that attached him to Misaki began to pull at him, dragging him rapidly towards her. *Ah, she's reeling me in. I hope this is how she puts me back in Honnouji*, though really he was sure that was how it worked. But at the last moment before he passed out, he could feel something else, lightly dragging his head back. Another tiny cord, so small he would never have seen it, was attached to the back of his head right where it reached his neck. And the other end, well that went to Ranketsu.

*What's this?* He had no time to ponder that question before his eyes slammed shut.

~~~~~

“GWOOUUH!” Houka gasped, sucking sweet air into his burning lungs. He was right back in his seat in the student council chamber, as though nothing had happened. For a moment all he could do, in spite of the shocked looks from the others, was take in huge, heaving breaths and just marvel at the fact that he was alive. Oh, to smell, to hear! He’d never appreciated the precious air around him so much.

“Inumuta, what’s wrong?” He ignored it. They didn’t matter, he had to collect his thoughts. The life-fibers, Ryuko and Ranketsu and Misaki, had it really been only thirty or so seconds or had it been a year? He kept revisiting every little detail, even the unnerving truth about Misaki – there were just so many more mysteries to unfold. *How do their bodies function? Can I even understand it without seeing multiple dimensions at once?* It was so tantalizing, his hands were shaking with excitement.

But first, the most important and exciting thing of them all. Space monster or not, that was the *real* Misaki. And he had some explaining to do to.

*I'm back! <*

*Thank you, I definitely believe in your identity now. <*

*> About time! I was starting to worry that your mind hadn't made it through the trip.*

*It tried. There's so much we'll have to talk about. But first, the reason I asked that. <*

*Ranketsu is attacking my mind as well. It's in here with me. <*

*And it took the form of Shiro to get me to give up the information. <*

*> What.*

*Where is the real Shiro right now? <*

*> He's in communication with Izanami's core, just as you are with mine. You haven't seen the real Shiro once since this started, rest assured.*

That deserved a sigh of relief, at least. It meant Shiro was in about the same situation as he was, and it wasn't as if he'd been talking to the real Shiro at first before Ranketsu had abruptly overtaken him.

*> I'll warn them, right away!*

*Thank you. Here, let me tell you how it went. <*

Houka briefly filled her in on everything, including his conclusion that Ranketsu read the main thread of his train of thought and needed him to think about something specific before it could be stolen.

*> But how did you figure it out? If it made such a perfect replica of Shiro, how could you tell?*

*Just a hunch, really. Something felt off. <*

*And I thought to myself, if Ryuko were in this situation, what would she do? <*

But of course, Misaki would protest. That wasn't really a helpful guideline. So he continued typing.

*I thought that everything around me could be under Ranketsu's control, even you. <*

*So the only thing I could trust was myself. <*

*It's the only logical move in a situation like that. <*

> *To abandon logic?*

*Precisely. <*

*And I have a hunch about how I can fight back now, too. <*

*I found how Ranketsu is linking to me. And I'm going to cut it. <*

## Chapter End Notes

This was arguably the hardest chapter to write yet.

A huge thank you to longtime reader WeirdEsoterica, who was totally invaluable in brainstorming this one.

Also, I did not make the image in this chapter. It's meant to represent, naturally, something akin to how Houka sees the life-fibers. But as for what it actually is, well, I have referred to the world the life-fibers inhabit as a sort of "cosmic ocean" before...

# Secret Sword

UNDEFINED

~~~~~

As a boy, Shiro prepared several hiding spots around his room in the Kiryuin manor. He never used them for their intended purpose – Satsuki never wanted to play hide-and-seek, and he knew that if his cover was blown hiding wouldn't save him from Ragyo. But there was one he favored anyway.

He had fashioned a false back to the dumbwaiter in his room. It had hinges at the top so it could flip both ways, making it easy to slide across the metal shaft and to the other side, where it opened into the back of the linen cabinet in his parent's bathroom. There was enough room behind the back row of towels for him to sit up without cramping, because just like every other part of the manor even the linen cabinet in the quarters of a distant relative was excessively large. This was where Shiro went not to hide from anyone, but to be completely and utterly alone with his thoughts. The pitch dark, the muffled noise of the dumbwaiter machinery humming, the overpowering scent of fresh laundry, it was almost a sort of sensory deprivation chamber. Whenever he was feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the danger, of the existential dread of sharing every day passing by inhuman monsters in the halls of his own home, of the massive weight placed on Satsuki's shoulders and by proxy his, he would go there.

~ “Ah, I see!” ~ Houka's voiced came in through his phone, illuminating the fuzzy “walls” of Shiro's hiding space. ~ “So your subconscious inner sanctum is the Kiryuin manor, that's surprising. I suppose maybe it's not meant to be the **safest** place per se, but the one that feels most like home and – huh.” ~

Shiro glowered back at him, though not the Shiro that Houka expected. Shiro was short but he was a fully grown adult and he wouldn't have fit in the hiding space. The boy looking back at Houka couldn't have been more than twelve. Shiro furrowed his brows even further, his eyes sunken and tired. ~ “Interesting. I suppose your mental image changes to keep the scale of the threat proportionate. Don't worry, I'll spare you the whole ‘It's so surreal to see you as a kid, how cute,’ conversation. I've seen your yearbook. So, onto business, you are under attack by Ranketsu too, I suppose?” ~

After a moment in which Shiro weighed whether answering was even as good idea, he said, “It's coming up from the basement. From Ragyo's dungeon.” His voice was a child's too, higher and thinner, much less deadpan than normal.

~ “I see! So, you must have figured the basics out too, right? That this space is a subconscious way to visualize the inside of Izanami's core, that you can communicate with Izanami using an electronic device, and that Ranketsu has infiltrated it and has some level of influence over events,” ~ Houka spoke fast. Then he said urgently, ~ “Have you encountered any potential imposters?” ~

Shiro shook his head, “I came right here.”



~ “Oh. Well that’s good, that’s good then. Because you see mine is Honnouji,” ~ He tilted his laptop, and Shiro could see the council chamber behind on his screen. ~ “So I was accosted by people before I had a chance, including an imposter and... well... But the good news is, I’ve had Misaki connect me to you because I think I’ve found a way to escape. Now, listen closely.” ~ He hurriedly filled Shiro in on everything he’d learned, and then said, ~ “So, what you need to do is ask Izanami to reconnect you to her clothes component. Once she does, it’ll be jarring, but what you’ll see and Ne -,” Houka laughed and beamed at Shiro, overcome by his own excitement, ~ “ - Well you really have to see it for yourself.” ~ He couldn’t resist though, ~ “It’s what we’ve been looking for, Shiro. A direct way into Ryuko’s spirit world. You remember when Rosuketsu attacked Saiban? It tried to make him aware of his true nature, and now Ranketsu is doing the same. Only Rosuketsu was trying to turn Saiban against us, but Ranketsu must have known that wasn’t possible. Misaki tells me that it is trying to cow them with despair, make them realize how outmatched they are. Heheheh, it doesn’t know us very well, does it? It should have known we don’t scare that easily, and that what it was really doing was giving us a discovery that just might make everything we’ve learned so far obsolete! Now, you may need a few tries to get a handle on it all, it is a lot to take in – really, it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. And yet,” ~ He had his hand on his chin, distracted by his own racing thoughts.

~ “There was something familiar about it. Shiro, it’s an ecosystem! There’s some kind of logic to it, I’m not sure what, but you could see something was going on. They harvest from the earth, the kamui eat them, and there must be more out there, but I can’t see what – well, you’ll see for yourself. But once you’ve got it under control, you’ll notice that there are two incorporeal cords, one connecting you to Izanami which seems to come from your heart, and one to Ranketsu from the back of your head. Find them, and then report back to me, and then we’ll figure out how we can cut that connection to Ranketsu. That is how we get free.” ~

“How...” Shiro said, “Do you expect me to believe that is the right course of action?”

~ “Well, uh, I will admit it sounds crazy. Just trust me though, once you’ve seen it the first time you’ll understand.” ~

“How can you expect me to trust you? How can you expect me to believe you are who you appear to be?”

So, he’s still at this stage, Houka thought, I can’t blame him. What to do about it though? He said, ~ “Ask Izanami. She and Misaki are still in contact, I just asked them to patch me through to you.” ~

“But how can I know that Izanami is real either?”

~ “You don’t just... feel it?” ~ Houka frowned.

“Of course I feel it. But I want to feel it. You said it yourself, Ranketsu is in my head! Anything I see or feel could be caused by it!” Shiro spat out, temper boiling over.

~ “Then what would prove it to you? What if I told you I’m the only one who knows that-“

“Anything you say, any secret between us Ranketsu could just get from me!” Shiro waved his hand, and Houka recoiled as though struck.

He protested, ~ “Then what can I say! What are you going to do! If you really think I’m not **me**, then-“ He couldn’t finish that. Shiro couldn’t mean that.

And when Shiro thought about it and realized what he was saying, he sighed. “I don’t know! I don’t know what to do, I just don’t... I don’t know what to think anymore.” He looked down into his lap, trying not to cry.

But Houka saw it with a powerful pang of sympathy. No, of course Shiro couldn’t take this in stride. He didn’t appear as a child just to match the setting; he hadn’t felt so humbled and small since he shared a roof with Ragyo. *That’s the difference between us*, Houka thought, *My pride couldn’t take it if I couldn’t get out of this situation. His can’t take that we’re in it at all.* He softly said, ~ “*That’s alright. Then you don’t have to. I’ll get us out of this. You just -*,” ~ He decided not to tell Shiro to just keep doing what he was doing – he could totally see him thinking that was a reverse psychology trick. ~ “*Yeah. Just don’t worry, I’ve got it.*” ~

Shiro lifted his head. Houka was about to wave goodbye, but he said, “Wait!” Houka waited. “If it’s really you, then are you sure that *you’re* right? How do you know you can escape?”

Houka shrugged, ~ “*When Junketsu took Ryuko, she got out of that. That must have been worse than this, right?*” ~

“Yes, but –,”

~ “*I’m not a being like Ryuko? I know. But I have a good feeling about this. And that’s worth a lot when you’re up against nonsense like this.*” ~

“Heh, nonsense, right,” Shiro’s eyes were glassy, but a bit of focus had come back in them. He was nearly sure this was the real Houka. Nearly. He dared to hope. “Well if you’re right, then I guess I’ll understand it. But be careful. You’re not so resilient as her.”

Houka chuckled, ~ “*If only. I was actually just thinking I could use the whole breathing in space thing for this too.*” Shiro was about to ask what Houka meant by that – he couldn’t help himself. But if anything was going to make him take action, it was leaving him hanging with a mystery like that. ~ “*Anyway, time’s wasting. Wish me luck,*” ~ Houka said, and then he hung up.

~~~~~

Back in the Honnouji council chamber, it was as if nothing at all had changed. Satsuki, Ira, Uzu, Nonon, Soroi, they were all idling around as though this was just a typical boring day, Ranketsu was still raising hell outside (though it sounded a bit closer now), and Houka was sitting at his desk as though he was just part of this picture.

> *You ready to go in again?*

*Just a moment, then yes.* <

Houka needed a moment to collect his thoughts. For one thing he had to steel himself for the pain of suffocation again, a process that involved a lot of deep, anxious breaths. But now on top of that, he mulled over how hard Shiro was taking it. *What can I do? There’s nothing I can do besides free us, and even then it will probably stick with him.* Of course, Houka wasn’t considering how this would stick with him, even though he’d basically already decided that returning to Ryuko’s “spirit world” to study it would become his new obsession.

> *Shiro is having a bad time, huh?*

Misaki hadn't been privy to Houka and Shiro's conversation, but she knew from Izanami that he was refusing to talk to her the way Houka and Misaki talked. And she knew he hadn't changed his mind.

*He's questioning everything he sees. He just can't trust anything that happens in this reality. <*

*Alright. I'm ready now. <*

*> Are you sure? You sure you can't make some kind of space suit?*

*I wish. I think I can only make things appear if I can buy them being there. <*

*We didn't have a space program at Honnouji. <*

He had in his hand a knife of the same make he'd stabbed the fake Shiro with. He'd found it in a drawer, which was no surprise. Honnouji was an arsenal in disguise, with hidden weapons of various types and uniformly high quality secreted in every room, especially the council chamber. But where could he go to find a space suit?

*But so long as you pull me back the same way I will be fine. I know to breathe out when I cross over <*

*> Okay. Changing your connection in five.*

*> Four.*

*> Three.*

*> Two.*

*> One.*

~~~~~

Houka instantly switched back to the chaos of the void. This time, he didn't hesitate. He was already exhaling as he was transported over. That was good because this was more than a dream, his body was in fact real, and if he hadn't his lungs would have decompressed and burst like overfilled balloons.

Without even bothering to check if he'd come back in the same place, he immediately waved his free hand behind him and swiftly seized on the tiny cord that connected him to Ranketsu. It was quite slack, rubbery and cold to the touch, and he wrapped it around his hand and pulled part of it in front of his eyes. In one smooth motion, he yanked it taut between his fist and the thumb of his knife-hand, and pressed up with the blade to cut into the gelatinous flesh.

He winced. It *hurt!* Pain rippled down his back and he shuddered. He didn't even consider stopping. *It's dug in deep, think of how good it will feel to be free of it!* He gritted his teeth and pushed even further. But the knife slid along the rubbery surface instead of digging in.

*What? Come on!* He pushed even harder, first with confidence and shortly with desperation, sawing and hacking even though it only made the pain worse. Before he even knew what was happening, the few seconds of consciousness he had were over.

~~~~~

Back in the council chamber again, Houka gasped for air and sunk into his chair. Just like last time, the rest all started and asked what the matter was. “It’s... nothing... just allergies,” He said as he caught his breath.

> *What happened?*

Misaki was messaging him too, and once he was sure that the others weren’t finally about to finally do something about him (he still suspected there was some point where he would violate their “simulation”) he responded.

*The knife wasn’t sharp enough.* <

> *No, really?*

*The material is a kind of jelly, with a hard outer casing. I couldn’t make an initial incision.* <

> *So is it impossible then?*

“No, no not impossible,” Houka muttered to himself, “I just need something sharper.” But what? Houka ran through the weaponry available. There were plenty of armories and forges in Honnouji, but to get to them he’d have to leave the council chamber. Here, he could wait and if Ranketsu wanted to get at him, it had to come to him. Out there, in the mazelike corridors, he wouldn’t know what was part of Misaki’s subconscious, basic “terrain”, and what was the enemy. *I might run into replicas of Ryuko and Mako, going to their classes. Yes, an impostor Ryuko is how it plans to get to me next, I have a feeling about that.* He could feel in his fingers that – now that he knew what was coming – attacking Ryuko would be harder than stabbing Shiro on pure spur-of-the-moment instinct. *But still, if I can make it to an armory, there will be lots of experimental weapons, even hardened life-fibers. So I’ll have to risk it.*

He stood up, and Satsuki immediately said, “Inumuta? Where are you going?” He stopped, outwardly calm but inwardly bracing for another attack from Ranketsu. She swiveled her chair to face him, passing her teacup to Soroi and placing a hand on Bakuzan’s scabbard as she did.

*Bakuzan!*

Houka’s mouth immediately popped open; he wanted to laugh, though he resisted that urge just in case Ranketsu was watching. Bakuzan could cut through anything, as he well knew. *Why didn’t I think of it before?* He could see it now, a smooth swing with Bakuzan was just the thing, the only thing that would sever Ranketsu’s connection.

Only, Bakuzan was Satsuki’s sword. A part of her identity, a part of *her*. *Do I really dare wield it myself, even in a dream? Will she even let me have it? Somehow, I doubt that she’d let me just walk up and grab it, even though I know it’s not really her.* Houka reminded himself, *But then, she’s either a part of me and Misaki, or a part of Ranketsu. Either way, how can taking it from her be a bad thing?* She was fixing him with that piercing look he knew well. She looked into his soul, but he looked right back, and somehow he just couldn’t see any hostility there.

“Lady Satsuki... may I have Bakuzan for a moment?” He briefly considered coming up with some kind of fib that fit the illusion. Maybe he wanted to run some material analyses on it –

he'd certainly done that plenty of times at Honnouji. But... no, "I... need to use it."

The others all gasped. Ira wheeled around to face him, brows furrowed in incredulous fury. Uzu and Nonon both sat up, and Nonon scoffed, "What are you talking about? You? Wield Bakuzan? Can you even lift it?"

"Bakuzan belongs to Satsuki alone!" Ira barked, "It was made for her, only she can bring out its true power! What you're suggesting is so highly improper... it's just not right!" He seemed to be struggling to articulate just how wrong this was in words. "You ought to know better!"

Uzu laughed to himself, "Yeah, you don't even know how to use it. It just ain't your strong suit, bud. If anyone was gonna use Bakuzan except her, it would be me! But there's no chance in hell even of that."

He leaned back, totally confident the issue was resolved. But Satsuki held up a hand. There was a trace of smile on her mouth, she was intrigued. The others halted in their protests. "I am inclined," She said deliberately, "To trust your judgement, Inumuta. I chose you as one of my Elites for that reason. We are a team." She looked pointedly at the others. "So, if you truly believe that you need Bakuzan then I trust you. Do you truly believe it?"

"I do, Lady Satsuki," She *gets it!* Houka's heart soared.

"It is not a mere tool. Bakuzan has strength beyond any ordinary sword, but using it is not so simple. It requires calm, focus, confidence, and most important of all – artistry. Are you certain you can bring out its potential?"

"I am, Lady Satsuki," He responded, getting into it now.

"And why," She went on, "Do you need Bakuzan? With it, you will be as strong as you can be. But you've never needed it before, you never wanted it before. What changed?"

This was the moment of truth; if she accepted an answer other than "*Because I need to stop Ranketsu from learning that you and Ryuko are sisters*", then she was a native to his and Misaki's shared subconscious. If not... *Well I've got nothing to lose in trying*, "Because what went wrong today, it's my fault. It's my responsibility to fix it. And when it's done, I know you will thank me," (In this case, he meant the real Satsuki). Satsuki tilted her eyebrows – she was intrigued but that wasn't quite what she wanted to hear. It was the right thing to say, but it wasn't what was really on Houka's mind now. *I really am talking to myself*, he could feel it. It felt like just the same way Ranketsu needed him to speak, now he needed to admit it to himself.

"And because when I get back and tell you about what I've discovered," Houka said, his typical wry, self-confident smile back in full force, "You'll all be amazed."

For a moment, all was silent.

Houka was uncomfortably aware of how close he had approached; he was right at the base of the stairs below Satsuki's chair and all eyes were on him. *What will I do if she says no? Could I make a grab for it? No, physically speaking that's still Satsuki.* Finally, Satsuki stood, and with slow, elegant steps descended to him. There was dead silence. She held Bakuzan before her, one hand on the hilt, the other on the scabbard. She could have easily drawn it and slashed across his body if she wanted to, an option Houka hadn't even considered.

“It means a lot to you,” she said when their eyes were level.

“Yes... it does.” Satsuki was holding Bakuzan close, but in front of her. It was half an offer, if she’d only extended her hands it would have been obvious that’s what she meant. But it wasn’t, and for a minute they stared right into each other as Houka waited. There was a faint smile curling the corners of Satsuki’s lips. She was... amused by all this? *Doesn’t she know how serious this is?* Taking Satsuki’s sword was as good as taking her place, saying “*I’m on the same level as her. I deserve it.*” Even though she was a part of Misaki, a part of *him*, she had to know that, right?

“What’s wrong?” She asked. Houka’s whole posture betrayed his uncertainty – shoulders up, hands clenching. “You wanted Bakuzan, didn’t you?”

“You’re... really giving it to me,” He said, an astonished and still slightly skeptical statement of fact. “I suppose I still expected you wouldn’t.”

“And why would you think that?” Satsuki said, with a challenging intensity in her eyes, “I told you, I chose you. I trust you. We’ve been in this together since the start.”

“Well, yes, only...” It took him a moment to put words to this feeling, that no matter how much he might need it the others were right. He just wasn’t meant to wield Bakuzan. “I surrendered to Ryuko back at the election tournament. Barely survived against Nui, let alone Ragyo. And even with all my planning Ranketsu still outmatched me in the end. I’m really not much, fighting on my own. A supporting role,” He jerked his head back to where the rest of the Elite Four watched, “That’s me.”

Satsuki didn’t miss a beat. “So?”

“So I just didn’t think you would be willing to give Bakuzan to someone who doesn’t deserve it.”

“I don’t think that,” She said, as stone cold serious as she ever could be. It was a biting reprimand; how could he have thought she saw it that way? *But then that means...* He shuddered as though briefly electrocuted. Alone, the fact that he was having a personified moral conflict made him feel dizzy, but that didn’t beat crossing into a dimension where he could see the life-fibers in their full glory. No, what really hit him was that he knew what Satsuki was about to say. *I don’t believe I deserve it!*

“What about you?”

Now Houka didn’t hesitate, he reached out and grabbed Bakuzan no matter how ambiguous Satsuki’s offering hands. Nonon, Ira, and Uzu all gasped together. Even Soroi’s heavy eyebrows rose. But Satsuki’s fingers slid off her sword without any resistance. Bakuzan was in his hands and an angry, self-reproaching fire burned in his chest.

Overcome with excitement, Houka grinned. The cool white leather of the grip was wonderfully smooth and soft in his hands, a new sensation despite having held the real deal before. But unlike in real life where Bakuzan’s perfect slicing was a subtle power, not immediately apparent, now he felt the weight and crackling potential of the weapon coursing through his fingers. Even still, his instinct was to let go of it and yet he resisted. “*Thank you,*” he said, nodding several times, and Satsuki gave him a quick bow back. Houka glowed with pride to see that she was smiling too.

The others could only stammer as he turned and strode confidently back to his computer. He typed out:

*Okay, I'm ready, send me back over again*

Before he sent it, he thought of several things he wanted to say. *"What part of my brain are you all meant to be, exactly? Is Bakuzan meant to represent something? Were you always going to give it to me?"* But, then again, the answers would probably just be exactly what he expected. So instead he said, "Watch this."

<

~~~~~

Back in the spirit world, Houka breathed out once again. This time, not with the desperate speed of someone bracing for the void of space, but with cool, measured focus. His grip on Bakuzan was firm, grounding him, and when his vision contracted and the squeeze of suffocation sucked on his hands and feet, his entire self was drawn into it. Aware only of it. He seized the scabbard and drew, smooth and soundless. The unmitigated sunlight glinted off it in brilliant contrast to Bakuzan's sheer black.

*I don't know what this place is; an illusion of my mind, of Misaki's, or a true new dimension,* He thought, hoping Ranketsu could hear, *So I can see why Shiro would give up against a force that could inflict this on him.* He lifted his arm and extended it, then bent it at the elbow to lower Bakuzan behind his back. *But I know that this will hurt you.*

He swung. Unimpeded by even gravity and air resistance, Bakuzan's arc was perfect and effortless. Houka might even have thought that he missed, except the effect was immediate. The clenching headache swelled, all of it siphoning into the point on the back of his skull where Ranketsu's cord had been. But now it floated free in the air, the remaining stump attached to Houka faded to nothing. As it did the pressure built, and built, and Houka was sure something was about to give – it or him.

Something did. With a sudden *\*Pop!\**, all the pain vanished in a gigantic release. It converted, like a wave crashing on rocks, from raging violence to smooth ripples that spread around Houka's head. And down into his body too. Be it the euphoria of triumph soothing his frazzled nerves or the actual physical effect of an internal battle abruptly won, he felt totally refreshed and the suffocation pains died down. So he could watch the world of life-fibers unfolding before with a feeling of sublime peace for a few seconds before he once again was pulled back. Nothing much had changed since the last time, only the light rising over the horizon in the north had gotten quite a lot brighter. But the vivid colors, the dazzling detail, the synchronous movement, it all seemed much less threatening now.

*I think I understand something about it now,* Houka thought with the sort of curious detachment that he naturally turned to when he felt most confident. *Ryuko is right to call it the "Spirit World", because the human spirit is what powers it all. I suppose we already knew that about kamui, but it's more than that. The life-fibers harvest it, that's basically the point of what Ryuko and Saiban have found out. They harvest it, but we access it directly. And on top of it, they build all this, a universe that has nothing to do with humans or even Earth at all. It's just raw energy to them, like sunlight to us on Earth.* The next thought clicked to him immediately, *And do we see the sun as being alive? Is that then how they see us? It explains why they refuse to even speak to us, only to Ryuko and the kamui. And why when they try that, they aren't very persuasive.*

He was amazed to find himself thinking, *Ragyo at least understood humans – kind of - but the life-fibers themselves can't fathom how we could possibly rise up against them!*

Houka immediately seized on that, his mind jumping through a string of related ideas. *When they look at our brains, they see just raw matter. Something to be controlled, the same as how Misaki said Ranketsu sees her computer components as just a combination of wires and transistors. Even I can't see everything in a brain which together makes a person, but they're so, so far beyond that! So how could they see our little experiences as "real life". I wonder if they even see us as separate organisms, or just one biosphere. Or even just one planet, after all we're only made of carbon, minerals, and water from the Earth.*

*The fusion of the simplest atoms makes the light that plants and plankton use to combine all the basic components into life, they are the source of nourishment for the whole biosphere, and on top of that, you get humans. And we with our minds, our consciousness, we provide the source of power for a world of ideas and emotions, of power. He wanted to laugh in amazement, How arrogant of us, to assume we were at the top of the great food chain of the universe! How arrogant of the life-fibers, to think they are superior to everything below them! Questions occurred to him, So what does it mean then that we and our kamui can both make and control this power? And what about how the life-fibers manipulated our evolution, did they create this entire food chain? Why? And, with a chill, And how do I know that there isn't another level above even the life-fibers?*

*There's so much more to learn!*

~~~~~

Houka expected to snap back to the council chamber and be greeted by incredulity, amazement, praise – everyone talking all at once. Something he probably should have looked forward to, basking in his accomplishment, but all Houka really wanted to do was catch his breath and jump right back in. He could still hear the noise of battle outside, even louder than before. Now it was time to cut Ranketsu's connection with Misaki, so he didn't have time to chat with fawning, imaginary people.

He did the same thing as usual, dropping into his chair paralyzed by lightheadedness. But when that cleared there was only one voice and a single, very familiar presence that pervaded everything.

"Damn, you really are almost dying each time you do that, huh?"

Misaki was there. She was leaning on the back of Satsuki's throne, drawn up in the flesh. She looked just like the animated avatar she had made for herself, practically Houka's twin. The one new innovation was that she wore a version of her clothing form, powered down, cut for a woman. She looked born to wear the bright blue uniform with its tall collar. All the student council was gone, after everything Houka didn't even bother being surprised. They had all been bits and pieces of Misaki, but breaking Ranketsu's hold on him meant he got more of her, that's all he needed to know. He just leaned back in his chair, laughing and pumping a fist in the air. Well, it was halfway between a laugh and a long, loud groan of relief, anyway.

Misaki laughed too, sharing in their victory. She strode over and laid her hands on his shoulders, massaging out the lingering dregs of pain. He jolted, because the moment she touched him their connection was restored. Not quite in full, no instant telepathic communication, but he could feel her rifling through his memories the same way he always did. A second train of thought humming along in the back of his mind. Houka wasn't ready for the sympathetic burst as she saw



through his eyes exactly what he'd just experienced. She wasn't amused any more at how close he'd come to death, or how many times. He tilted his head back and stared into her eyes – green now, like his, but the same as her usual orange one's too – and fought hard to resist the urge to cry.

Not that he was ashamed to cry in front of his own Kamui, no. But because there was no time for that.

“So. What next?”

“Next.” He straightened up, pushed his glasses up, swiveled around to face her, and said, “We get out of here.” Misaki grinned. “First, let's review what we know: For one, this space is like what Ryuko called her ‘shared imagination’, where she goes to be with Senketsu. Or like the space that Mako and Senketsu went to, when they freed Ryuko from Junketsu. I am now *convinced* that these types of spaces are in fact separate dimensions, or maybe just part of a dimension, enclosed within a transdimensional being's body!” He motioned emphatically with his hands as he spoke. “That the mind of a kamui, far from being an abstract, ineffable *thing* is a real, physical place totally separate from our ordinary world!”

“It explains how you are able to make objects appear, or change its appearance based on your subconscious impressions,” Misaki nodded. “Though, this must be my ‘imagination dimension’, so your influence here is only limited to things you can believe would exist.” With a hand to her chin she said, “Then if we can get out of here, and return on our own terms, I must learn to control it better! But, anyway, your body next. Ryuko said she creates a body for herself that so she can be in the imagination as a human. She also had a separate body inside Junketsu, so I think there's precedent to say that you right now aren't in your real body. It's one you, or I, or we made for you to inhabit here.”

“Thank goodness for that, huh?” Houka said, “Because taking trips to space like that might be doing some permanent damage. Oh, and Ryuko even also made a body for Senketsu too, let's not forget,” He held out a hand towards her.

“Oh, shit that's right! Cut from stone, right?” She proudly patted her chest - flesh, complete with clothes, “Though, I had already made a basic model for it, Senketsu never even tried to look human eh? To be fair.”

“One must be fair,” Houka chuckled. “So, if this is your imagination, then where did I just get back from?”

“Ranketsu's ‘imagination dimension’? It is what it wanted to show me, after all.”

Houka shook his head, “But could its imagination contain all of you? All of Ryuko? And that really was Ryuko, you felt that I'm sure.”

Misaki nodded, enthusiasm was tamped by a distant, lost look. Just as she could see his memories, Houka could see hers. See, but not understand. It must have been the perspective from her huge multidimensional body that he'd seen in orbit, but the stream of information was too fast, from too many angles. She had more eyes than he did, that was the issue. He didn't have the full telepathic link he needed to tell what she thought about it, either. But he could tell enough. She was deeply disquieted by it. By seeing just how inhuman she, the other kamui, and Ryuko really were. Especially by Ryuko.

Because that wasn't the Ryuko she had known her entire life, cocky and temperamental yes but always caring and, most importantly, human. Not the Ryuko that was the closest thing to a mother she had. Misaki had seen the power she kept hidden made manifest, a raw, unconquerable force in the shape of a beast. It could crush her, it could *devour* her without much trouble. Of course it wouldn't, Ryuko wouldn't, but if it did it would be simple, factual. A comet pulled into a star's orbit and engulfed. How had she been so intent on studying it, on unlocking its secrets? In that moment, she had prayed it wouldn't notice her. After a pause, Misaki shook her head and looked at Houka steely eyed. "Yeah. Okay. So maybe it was really Ryuko. What's that mean then?"

"Well, I propose that it's not one of these internal dimensions. Ranketsu made you aware of at least part of your full form, one slice of it. Perhaps it is somehow "closer" to the prime dimension we come from, because the Earth still had a spherical shape and Ryuko said in some dimensions that wasn't true," Houka carried on, no sense dwelling on it with so much else to do. He got up and waved his hand animatedly as he said, "The point is, I can say for sure that Ranketsu doesn't have full control there, and if I do something to Ranketsu there, it will have a real effect. Cutting my connection to Ranketsu had an effect, so cutting yours, well that might free us all the way."

"Right. In the end it all narrows down to that one simple task," Misaki agreed.

"And how is it that we know that?"

Misaki knew what he was thinking, "Because it feels right, it worked before, and that's good enough!"

"Exactly!"

"So," Misaki said, plopping down in Houka's place. She crossed her legs, looking confident, managerial. "What do you need?"

"A spacesuit!" Houka demanded. Sure, he may not have been able to conjure one up, but this was Misaki's world. And as soon as he said it, one of the wall panels popped out with a hermetic hiss. Misaki inclined her head towards it proudly. The shiny metal panel was tall and thin, one end of a sort of glass case. And inside was exactly what he asked for. Skintight, bright cyan, traced with glowing lines that branched like leaf veins, it had a sleek blue triangular chestplate whose tips extended over the shoulders and with thrusters built into its back. And its collar was high, a full tight clinging circle, perfect for Houka's long and thin neck. Above that, a perfectly spherical glass globe, tinted a light, opalescent shade and intensely reflective. It even had loop at the belt where Bakuzan's scabbard would fit.

"Now that..." Houka approached it with due reverence. On the shouldertips he could see the faint lines of closed eyes. Misaki had just created a new form for herself. "Is going to work *just* right."

He wasted no time changing into it. As he shed his Goku Uniform the glass panes slid away, but the spacesuit stayed floating. Houka gently lifted it down with both hands, and when he tugged on the collar the helmet popped off and the suit unzipped down the front effortlessly. Putting it on was no less effortless, despite how skintight and paper thin its long sleeves and legs were they slid on without resistance. It felt cool and dry, it might as well not have been there at all. He lifted the spherical helmet onto his head, and with a hiss it slotted into place. Air immediately began flowing in from tiny vents around the silvery rim of the collar – from nowhere, as far as Houka could tell.

“You know I thought it would be harder to see through this from outside,” Houka said, tapping his helmet. Indeed from inside his vision was tinted only the faintest blue, the helmet had a sort of one-way-mirror effect.

Misaki chuckled, “It looks cool! A mysterious astronaut from another dimension – who is he? What does he want?” He could see her mouth moving, but her voice seemed to come from inside the helmet. Her eyes narrowed, “You’re thinking it ought to be ‘dimensionaut’ instead, aren’t you?”

“You’ve got to admit, that would be consistent with the etymology. Aquanaut, Astronaut, it’s all based on the medium you travel through.” He felt the power surging through him, an outward press that mildly suggested he could smash through anything he touched. No doubt about it, he once again had the power of a kamui and it was like nothing bad had ever happened.

“We’re going to workshop that one, okay?”

“Ah, that’s what everyone says.”

“I mean it! But later. I do seriously think Ranketsu will get through the last of my defenses any moment now,” She stood up, stood before him. Houka made sure to fix her in his memory; if everything went right this would probably be the last time he saw her like this for a while. “Dimensionaut Houka Inumuta,” She said with mocking pomp, “Are you ready to jump?”

Houka slid Bakuzan’s scabbard into place and raised it vertical before him. “I am!”

And, breathing easy this time, he went.

~~~~~

Once again, Houka instantly snapped from the relatively cozy confines of Honnouji’s student council chamber to spinning in space. Only this time there was no agonizing suction as the air was yanked from his lungs, no odd tingling feeling as the unmitigated ultraviolet power of the sun pelted his skin. He knew such a sleek spacesuit, bereft of protective layering or even an air tank, shouldn’t do anything to protect him. And yet here he was.

There was a faint shifting over his shoulders. Misaki opened her eyes. Perhaps seeing the sight from his perspective gave her a different view of it, but she was all business, ~ “*Okay. Where to?*” ~

“Set us on a circular course, try to hit them all in one go.” He pointed to the cords that connected Ranketsu and Misaki. Usually, getting a kamui’s cooperation was as simple as wishing for it, that’s what it meant to fight as one. But Misaki still couldn’t hear his thoughts or he hers. She fired the thrusters on Houka’s back gently, motoring off at an oblique angle. Houka helped by tilting himself slightly so that they gradually spun outward. After a couple passes, he was tearing through space ever wider, ever faster, and finally reached the circle of Ranketsu’s cords.

“Let’s go!” Bakuzan flashed out, slicing the nearest tentacle with ease. Its transparent purple, jellyish flesh rippled violently. Tree-trunk thick but not nearly so durable, it puckered as if it could recoil from the place it had been sliced in half. But just like the smaller cord that attacked Houka, the moment it was cut the part now severed from Ranketsu began to fade. It would eventually vanish entire, but Houka wasn’t sticking around to see it. “And onto the next!”

But out of the corner of his eye he saw something rocket past. Another of Ranketsu's cords, sailing towards Misaki. He caught a glimpse of its speartip, a brutal four-sided point, before it pulled taught. A tremor, almost a faint electric shock passed through Misaki and she grunted.

~ "No! It knows what we're doing! We'll have to go faster!" ~ And pushed her thrusters to fire even faster.

One after another, Houka cut the Ranketsu's cords. And one after another, new replacements whizzed past. *Time is on my side!* He realized triumphantly. *No air resistance, no gravity, I wonder how fast I'm even going now!* It must have been tremendously fast, each time he cut a cord he turned to the next and saw it as a vanishingly thin line and within an instant it had grown to full size in his eyes. Misaki took care of the fine adjustments to keep him right on course, all he had to do was swing Bakuzan. It was in constant motion as he passed cords by on the left and right, and he cut down each in turn. The replacements came down, but not quite as fast. The advantage only shifted further into Houka's favor.

First there were only five left, then four. The third-last was bit far to the right, slightly difficult, and then correcting back for second was a near thing too. But the last one, that last one they were right on course for.

~ "Oh no! Behind us!" ~ Misaki said. Houka's heart sank. He didn't need to look to know that Ranketse was launching another salvo, and this time they were shooting for where Houka had started. He'd been moving outward in a rough circle, reversing his direction of motion in space would require inputting just as much energy – and therefore time – into reversing as Misaki had put in. And then some more to actually get moving. ~ "By the time we catch up, we'll be right where we started!" ~ But Houka's body was in motion before she even spoke.

"Hah!" He grunted, tucking his legs up and wheeling his body around so that he flew with his feet forward. He dove towards the cord not to cut it - not yet - but to rebound off it.

~ "Oho, I see! Let's go then!" ~ Misaki crowed, and she tilted the vents on her thrusters straight up and blasted a huge gout of blue flame right behind Houka's head, giving him one final burst of speed right before impact.

Tremendously fast indeed. The cord was pulled taught, rigid between two impossibly huge beings – the leviathan Misaki and the living mountain Ranketsu. And here was Houka, barely breaking 200 pounds. It should not have given way. But it did. He was a small bullet, but one with the speed of a shooting comet and the flaming tail to match. Houka's feet made contact, caving the rubbery surface in. He didn't feel like he had slowed down at all.

Ranketsu and Misaki both lurched. In an instant, the cord went from straight line to bowed in – not just a minor bend, an oblique angle. Up until now Houka had kept just about directly between the two kamui – it was a huge space, relative to him anyway. But now Misaki stopped trying to steer him in a circle and he shot out way past the huge wings of her true form. The cord bent so far, to such a narrow angle that on either side it nearly reached Houka's shoulders. He had a dizzying view of the world below him, unobstructed by the kamui.

And not a lot of time to appreciate it because the snapback came fast. The very moment he stopped Houka felt it like a hill on a rollercoaster, pressing up through his stomach. He was suddenly moving backwards, racing even faster than he'd gone before in the opposite direction. He looked up and saw the last salvo of cords. Only one had struck home yet, and it was dead ahead. ~ "One chance!" ~ Misaki spurred him on, ~ "Get ready!" ~

From a thin line to a towering column, the cord grew abruptly. Houka rode the recoil, crouching low. His ride wasn't at the peak of its snapback, not even close, so he leapt off it at the last possible moment. He twisted his body, and Bakuzan came with it. It was the last great exertion he could manage, clenching his core muscles to the max to spin like a top with Bakuzan outstretched. He was right between the last two cords and it cleaved right through both of them, a brilliant white flash that lasted just an instant before he hurtled on.

But that too was only for an instant because he was about to jump again. Just like before there was no warning, no sensation of it. He didn't even have time to wonder where he'd be going next.

~~~~~

October 2068

~~~~~

On the blasted concrete plain, all was still. The towering particle accelerator – lowered into the ground a bit so that only its top half protruded - pulsed merrily, and the wind blew a few low drifts of ash in tight spirals.

Suddenly, from a seam between the concrete tiles so narrow it almost avoided notice, *Kiba's* blade erupted. It pushed down, levering a tile up, and through the gap Nonon peered.

"Coast's clear! Alright boys, heave!" She shouted. As one, she, Mataro, and Yuda all struck from below, flinging the concrete tile high into the air. It tumbled end over end, then landed by the outer wall and shattered into a million pieces. By which time the three of them had already leapt to the surface.

"Ah, sweet light!" Mataro exclaimed. Wakaiketsu rubbed her eyes with the ends of his cloak. He was carrying Lucille, still unconscious, and set her down gently.

"You're telling me," Yuda said, "You and your Shingantsu, I didn't notice you having trouble getting around with the power out." Mataro just shrugged.

Nonon shrugged dismissively too, "Our Kamui make sufficient light, it was fine."

"Right. 'Cuz it's not like anyone flew into at least four girders on the way up or anything," Mataro smirk. Nonon glared at him, but then she smirked too.

"What's that supposed to mean?" She said, the picture of innocence. And then her eyes narrowed, "Now come on! No more delay now."

They dashed over to the edge of the particle accelerator and cast around. "There!" Mataro spotted them first – Houka and Shiro, lying unconscious with their kamui powered down and their weapons scattered around. They lay just at the rim where the concrete arena floor stopped and below on the particle accelerator's control patten Ranketsu was standing. It was stock still, entranced, all its focus put into its attack on Izanami and Misaki.

"Oh shit, it's just what I was afraid of!" Nonon hissed. She motioned to them to keep down, but there was really no risk of Ranketsu seeing them. "Let's go! Just, uh, don't hit their life-fibers!"

“We can really just attack her?” Mataro asked, hesitating before the jump. “It won’t hurt them somehow?”

“It’s fine! I’ve been in their place, they’ll live!” And she flitted up into the air, the others leaping right after her.

But as they swooped around, something moving extremely fast struck the ground right next to Shiro. It skidded across the ground, kicking up a massive cloud of dust and rubble, and in the distance they could see it ping-pong off the edge of the arena and the life-fiber barrier that enclosed it. Finally it touched down, buckling the tiles beneath it and shaking the ground.

Two other things happened immediately that made them stop. Ranketsu jolted, and its host grunted, “Augh!” in a very genuine and human-sounding expression of shock and pain. It released its grip on the bundle of life-fibers it had pulled from the particle accelerator’s control panel. Nonon and Yuda stopped abruptly and watched as its sleeve wound back together and resumed its usual shape. And right after that, Shiro jolted too. His body heaved upwards and his eyes popped open as he suddenly returned to life, and he took in a gigantic, noisy gasp of air.

“Shiro!” Nonon shouted. But Shiro had no time for talk. He was clearly taking the return to reality quite poorly, his face bright red and sweating with every muscle and vein bulging. With great effort, he rolled over onto his hands and knees and immediately began vomiting profusely. Nonon immediately hurried over to him – they were here to rescue him after all.

Mataro didn’t hesitate though; he wasn’t unaware of what was happening, but he was so caught up in the fight he didn’t think. He lunged for Ranketsu and Ranketsu sprung away, spear spinning. But this time the difference in speed was not so great. Ranketsu was exhausted, Mataro caught up to it, and they began to fight across the concrete plain. That kept Ranketsu occupied while Nonon and Yuda helped Shiro to sit up.

“What the fuck...” Nonon muttered, “What just happened?”

“Hey, Nonon, did you notice –“ Yuda started, but then Shiro spoke.

“Ho... oh... *God*,” Shiro groaned. He wiped his mouth, and then said, “He really did it!”

“Who?”

“H-Houka!” He had to force down another gag to say it. “I should’ve believed him...”

“What are you talking about?”

Yuda tugged on Nonon’s arm, “Lady Nonon! Look! Where *is* Houka?” Sure enough, there were his two fencing blades, untouched, on either side of the roughly man-sized divot that fast-flying object had made.

Nonon looked at that, wide-eyed. “Yeah, he was right there, wasn’t he? So where did he go?”

~ “*Not so far as you might think!*” ~

“Houka!” His voice in her earpiece was unmistakable. “Wh – you’re alright? Where are you?”

~ “I’m kind of disappointed you’re asking!” ~ He said cheerfully, ~ “I thought I made a pretty good entrance!” ~

“Hold up, you’re saying *that* was you?” Nonon whipped her head around to the huge crater that the object – which she now understood was Houka – had made. She was just in time to see a man emerge from the roiling dust cloud. A man clad in a skintight blue spacesuit with a globe-shaped, opaque helmet.

[*So, momentum carries through dimension jumps,*] Misaki said, once again back in Houka’s head. [*How does that make any sense?*]

“Later,” Houka hushed her. He pressed his hands to his helmet to unscrew it, and Misaki immediately sense his intent – oh how nice that was! – and it quickly collapsed from the top down, sucked into his collar. He waved to Nonon, who he could only see as a tiny shape – she was rubbing her eyes in bemusement. ~ “*Afraid so!*” ~ He shouted over their earpieces, ~ “*Sorry about the whole getting possessed by Ranketsu thing! But we’re here now! Let’s win this!*” ~

~ “*Is that a new form?*” ~ Nonon shouted back, smiling. It was as if they could just raise their voices enough to hear each other without the earpieces. That wasn’t true, they were much too far away, but they were suddenly way too amped to think about that.

~ “*Like it! This is Kamui Misaki: the Dimensionaut!*” ~

[*Oho, no it’s **not!***] Misaki laughed, but it was too late now. Houka’s blood was pumping in a way that was truly rare for him.

~ “*The hell? When? How?*” ~

~ “*It’s a long, crazy story. I’ll fill you in later,*” ~ He said, but then couldn’t resist adding, ~ “*I went to space, Nonon.*” ~

~ “*You’re fucking with me, aren’t you?*” ~

Houka laughed, ~ “*Oh, you have no idea. Now let’s go!*” ~

~ “*Right! Let’s kill that bitch!*” ~ Nonon said, and she sprung to the ready, prepared to rocket towards Ranketsu and Mataro.

~ “*Wait, no!*” ~ Houka protested. ~ “*We’ve still got to capture her!*” ~

~ “*Ugh, are you for real? After everything you’re still stuck on that?*”

~ “*More than ever! That’s the only way to make this huge blunder worth it!*” ~ Houka’s tone brooked no argument.

So Nonon groaned, shrugged, and said, ~ “*Well fine then! Boys, looks like it’s disarming moves again, ya hear? Yuda, you ready?*” ~

“You bet!”

~ “*Mataro, how’s she looking?*” ~

~ “Old girl’s finally starting to slow down!” ~ Mataro responded, ~ “Still she don’t give up so easily.” ~

~ “Ranketsu is an ‘it’!” ~ Houka corrected him.

~ “I don’t care!” ~

~ “Alright then, we know what we gotta do!” ~ Nonon was about to jump into combat when Shiro began, shakily, rising to his feet.

“Me... too...” He managed. But he was looking anything but combat ready, shaking like a leaf and still gasping for each breath.

“What?” Nonon turned to him, immediately softening out of combat mode. “No man, you’re done for the day.”

“But...” Shiro protested. Nonon gave Yuda a nod and he raced off to fight, while she put a hand on Shiro’s back and lowered him back down. “But, Houka’s right. We messed up, *bad*, and now... well he found a way out of Ranketsu’s mind... attack... thing, and I didn’t believe him! I’ve got to –,” He tried to stand again, but Nonon crouched down next to him.

“Got to? What you’ve got to do is rest, at *least* for a minute. I’ve been there, trust me,” She said, equally gently and firmly. “It fucking hurts, and *I* was still conscious. So, take it as an order, if you need to, but you aren’t fighting anymore.”

Shiro nodded, whether he was dazed or lost in his own shamed thoughts wasn’t clear. Izanami hesitantly offered, *[Well, I suppose we can focus on rebooting our system. We’ll need it to tranquilize Ranketsu once we catch it, anyway.]*

Nonon heard that through Saiban, “There you go, that’s probably the most useful thing anyway. Oh, and you can look after this REVOCS girl Mataro decided to save for some reason. She’s over there, pretty far from the fight.” Nonon pointed, and then she said leapt off into the fight.

In the meantime, the combined force of Mataro, Yuda, and Houka was already more than Ranketsu could handle. Mataro kept the immediate pressure on it with his blades – it had to focus mostly on blocking him. Which meant Houka, who was without a weapon, could score sneaky kicks and punches to its back and the weak points of its arms, waist, and knees. He couldn’t trip Ranketsu, it was still capable of floating, but at one moment when he dropped it to a knee, Yuda struck. He hooked both his karambits around the bottom of the spear and yanked up. At the same time, Mataro leapt up and slammed his feet down on the flat side of the speartip.

*[I got it!]* Wakaiketsu was enthused, and as she shouted it out the circular force yanked the spear right from Ranketsu’s hands and sent it hurtling off into the distance. Nobody even saw where it landed this time.

*[That was **our** idea!]* Rama retorted. But then Nonon blasted on the scene, zooming in horizontally and cracking Ranketsu over the head with the flat of Kiba’s blade. Saiban’s presence shut their quarreling up. Ranketsu was flattened out, but even that wasn’t enough. It caught itself hovering before it hit the ground and, snarling with rage, whirled around at grabbed Nonon by the arm. She responded with a kick to the chin that sent Ranketsu flying towards the center of the arena, with everyone immediately wheeling around to chase.



Houka got there first and was greeted with a furious flurry of punches. “You just don’t quit, do you?” He laughed. He blocked the first few blows and then ducked under another, stepping through Ranketsu’s reach and throwing a mighty punch right into its host’s solar plexus. With the full force of his strength behind it a shockwave boomed from his fist and Ranketsu was hurtling back again.

And so the battle progressed. Ranketsu was outmatched, utterly, and they could have killed her at their leisure if they wanted. They encircled it, battering it in sync. Houka and Nonon and Mataro and Yuda worked together in pairs. Each pair would attack in concert, from opposite sides, together raining in the punches and kicks (they had taken the time to shrink and stow their weapons). It managed to block most of their blows, but even those carried bone-crushing shockwaves. And when they did get through, they always struck to blast Ranketsu further into the center of the arena. Even a hardened human warrior would have broken under this utter beatdown, but Ranketsu fought to the end.

They were within a hundred yards of the center, when suddenly Ranketsu stopped blocking. A now-familiar light was tingling on its skin. The air seemed to go darker.

Houka gasped, “Cosmic empowerment! Get back!”

“Again? It’ll destroy itself for sure!” Nonon shouted as she dashed backwards. Indeed, the poor host seemed to be on her last legs. Eyes flickering, normally dark skin turning to a sickly pallor, lips white and bloodless. How could it go on any longer? They all waited to see.

Ranketsu struck fast. As if it had lost none of its former potency, it dashed straight for Nonon before any of them could react. It tackled her and threw her to the ground, and all of a sudden, its fists were a blur. “Holy shit!” She managed to blurt as she crossed her arms in front of her chest. Mataro and Yuda rushed to her aid, but the glowing force rising from Ranketsu blasted them back. It was battering Nonon too, along with that force Saiban was suddenly under a tremendous pressure. All of Ranketsu’s remaining strength at once, and it was an amount that shocked Saiban.

It happened so fast that Nonon didn’t even realize the danger she was in. She was only minorly annoyed until, with one last punch, she felt something crash around her and the brutal pain of her whole body being slammed forcibly into the concrete. Every minute rough edge impaled her spin, and there was nothing to prevent it.

Saiban realized what had happened just as she did. [*My barrier!*] He blurted in shock. Another fist was coming down, and in desperation Nonon held up a hand to catch it. Saiban’s protective barrier had failed, but the strength and reaction time he gave hadn’t. Nonon’s fingers wrapped around Ranketsu’s fist, and their arms trembled and strained against each other. “Mother... fucker...” Nonon hissed. Her other hand shot down towards her waist, where there was a tiny pocket that concealed *Kiba* while it was shrunk down. But Ranketsu plunged her other hand down too and pinned Nonon’s to the ground. Still, with gritted teeth and a furious snarl marring her pretty little face, she kept straining for it. “I’m... gonna *gut* you...”

That was when Houka did what turned out to be his last impulsive, reckless, death-defying act of the day. Ranketsu looked up, just in time to see him tackle her head on. They punched each other over and over again as they tumbled, all raw animal fury. But Houka had chosen his direction of flight well.

They were headed right for the particle accelerator.

They hurtled off the edge together. They flew right into the center of the ring, where the air warped, together. And then they froze there, pressed belly to belly. Together.

“Ough!” Houka grunted. Ranketsu writhed furiously, but it couldn’t get away. All was calm and still once more.

The others, including Shiro, all leapt over to see. And this time it was Shiro helping Nonon to stand. She winced with every movement.

And when Mataro saw her back, he winced too, “Ooh! Damn, that is some nasty roadrash!” From heels to shoulders, the entire back of her body was rubbed raw. Between constellations of blood pinpricks, fresh bruises, and general redness it made for a mess picture.

She straightened up stiffly and said, "It's fine." Then, to Shiro, "It is fine, right?"

He looked her up and down and appraised her breathing (even, no broken ribs) and said, “It’s surface level only.”

“Then good.” And she strode forward to address Houka. He was laughing to himself, face split by a broad grin, and he stared right into Ranketsu’s huge eye. “Alright you crazy bastard! You caught her, and I only *minorly* regret it! So, what the hell do we do now? Getting stuck in there with her wasn’t part of your plan, was it?” She looked down at the control panel – it was completely destroyed. “Uh, you’re not gonna like, get crushed by a black hole or something are you?”

“Huh? Oh, no, hardly,” Houka barked back, at the peak of high spirits. He turned his head to the side as much as he could, looking at her out of one eye. “The pressure is mild but effective. I have tested it on myself before you know,” He said, which made him burst out in laughter, “Why wouldn’t I? Shiro? You get the computers back online?”

“I did!” Shiro called up, “With minimal data loss too!”

“Beautiful! Then get the tranquilizer darts ready, if you’d please! Once Ranketsu’s host has been paralyzed and it has powered down, you should be able to turn off the accelerator without any risk.” He shuffled around uncomfortably, “And no rush or anything, but this isn’t exactly comforta-,”

A flash of metal. The intricate blue lights of Ranketsu's sleeve. A splash of blood. It all happened so fast Houka didn't even realize what had just happened. And then half his vision was gone.

Ranketsu had summoned up an absolute last reserve of energy from somewhere. And it still had its dagger secreted away in its sleeve. One slash was all it could manage. Maybe it meant to cut Houka's throat, who knew, but what it did manage was bad enough.

It struck out his eye.

“Oh-ah-AH-AHHH-*AIEEEEEEEEE!*” Houka screamed in overwhelming pain. Contorting his body he struck out for the hand holding Ranketsu’s dagger, but just as he seized it he locked up again. Neither could do anything. Each breath he took was another grunt of agony, and he only took enough to keep on screaming, “Goh-goh-GAAAIIIIEEEEEE!”

Nonon's momentary shock shot through all her years of training. *He's dying!* She thought, and her hand clapped to her slackjawed mouth before she could do anything. Mataro and Yuda too were no help. They both just started screaming.

Shiro, on the other hand, bellowed “**NO!**” and Izanami acted for him. The ground erupted, dozens, hundreds of gunports emerging from the gloom. As one they each fired a single shot, and the darts converged on Ranketsu's. Their puffy red tails coated every inch of its cloth and its host's skin. It took less than a second for them to empty themselves into Ranketsu, and then in a flash of white light they all peeled off. The host's head rolled to the side, Ranketsu had powered down to resemble a sari, and the blood-soaked dagger floated away. Shiro shouted to Mataro and Yuda, “*Be ready to catch them!*” in a voice of urgent command they'd never heard from him. Izanami powered down the particle accelerator, and they were ready. Mataro dashed out and snatched Houka, firing Wakaiketsu's thrusters to boost himself back towards Shiro. Then Yuda leapt in to snatch Ranketsu before it fell very far, slid down to the control platform, and jumped up from there.

A stretcher emerged from a fresh hole in the ground before Shiro, and Mataro laid Houka gently on it. Blood poured down his face, there was nothing to see but a red pool where his left eye had been. He was still groaning, but there was nothing he could say or do. He was insensate with pain.

Nonon ran over, and they all crowded around. “Ohmygod ohmygod, *Houka!*” She gasped, horrified. “You can, you can save him, right? *Can* you save him?” Shiro wasn't answering.

“Houka!” He blurted, “Houka, I-I'm sorry! It's I-it's all –“ At this point he broke down crying and the words came out all choked, “All my f-fault! I should've believed you! I should've... I'm so *sorry*.” He clutched at Houka's hand, squeezing it tightly. “*Don't die!*”

“DIE!”

“Whoa, no! You can't be serious!”

[*Shiro!*] It was Misaki, and through Izanami she spoke directly to him. He immediately recoiled from the harsh reproach in her voice, [*Get ahold of yourself and get some fucking sedatives in him. You're sorry? It's your fault? Then fucking fix. It. You're the world's top biologist, in the most advanced scientific facility that's ever existed. You operated on **Ryuko**. He's only lost an eye, people lose them all the time. Trust me his brain is fine. So do. Your. Job.*]

Shiro didn't stop crying, but his squeeze on Houka's hand softened. “Izanami...” he said in a quavering voice, “prepared the anesthetic and the coagulant. And create a sterile sealed chamber around us.”

[*Already on it.*] The results were instantaneous. New seams sawed themselves into the concrete on all sides and thin walls of pure white rose from them. The others stepped back outside the newly forming room.

“You can really save him?” Nonon asked. “‘Cuz, you said die, and...”

Machines were rising around Shiro too. Dozens of robot arms. Needles were driving into Houka's arms, and one seemed to be wicking away at the blood on his face. Shiro looked up with a thin, grim smile, “The readouts are already coming in. Blood loss is within acceptable levels. It

really is the very least I can do.” And then the walls rose past his face, soon to seal up entirely with a last puff of air.

And now all was truly still. Neither Nonon, Mataro, or Yuda said anything. Eventually, Nonon sat down on the floor, leaning on the wall of the new room.

“You, uh, you left a blood trail,” Mataro said, pointing to the wall above her head where red streaks ran down its smooth white surface.

“I... don’t care. Do you?”

“Not really, no,” Mataro said, and then he sat down too and Yuda followed.

Minutes passed.

“Ah shit, what are we meant to do with her?” Mataro suddenly said, pointing to Ranketsu. His host was still quite thoroughly out, sprawled on the ground.

Nonon inclined her head towards Ranketsu and eventually said, “She breathing?”

Yuda waved a hand in front of her mouth, and said, “Yup. She’s asleep, I think.”

“Well, if she wakes up, we’ll try and find her some water, I guess. She’s lost a lot of blood.” Nonon managed to crack a smile, “She might be more fucked up than *he* is. I doubt she’d try and power up again if she even knows how to do it herself.”

Mataro and Yuda nodded, satisfied. After a few more moments, Yuda spoke, “You notice, Houka had a scabbard attached to his new form? Only the one though, and he has two swords. Looked like it was for a katana, too.”

“Huh. Well, when he recovers, you can ask him.”

“I feel like I’ve seen it somewhere before, too,” Yuda went on. “It was white, with a silver tip and a silver topmount with a crossguard. Silver tassles tied around it too, the same color. And the crossguard had these holes in it, one on either side.”

Nonon suddenly looked up, her attention restored. “You idiot, you really don’t know what you’re describing? I’d know it anywhere. What you just said, you know what that sounds exactly like?”

She saw it then. In the distance between Mataro and Yuda’s heads, lodged in the ground next to the trail Houka left when he first arrived. Its black blade was nearly invisible in the night, but the white leather of the hilt was enough.

“Bakuzan!”

# Midnight Sun

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October 2068

~~~~~

30 Minutes to Midnight

~~~~~

“I’m proud of them, y’know?” Ryuko said. She and Satsuki were at their place on the seawall, overlooking the naval battle. Satsuki had finished evacuating those few sailors Mako had rescued a while ago, now she was helping Ryuko to open gaps in her shield for more artillery barrages to pass through. It wasn’t hard, just pointing batteries that were about to fire on the tablet so Ryuko could do the rest.

“Yes, me too,” Satsuki agreed.

Ryuko chuckled, “What an obvious thing to say, you’re thinking. How trite.”

“No!” Satsuki protested, giving Ryuko a little shove on the shoulder.

“But really, think about it though! Only you and I of everyone on Earth knew what they were gonna experience when they first got their kamui,” Ryuko went on. “They didn’t know what it would be like. And even we didn’t know that they really would get so strong, that they wouldn’t like... I dunno, not get along with their kamui, or go berserk or just... get killed. They did it all just on their faith in us, and yet even today everything is going right... right?”

“Mmm, but that’s how they’ve always been. Never afraid to put their lives on the line.”

“Yeah, I know, but then you’ve got Mako,” Ryuko shrugged, “I just think this is different, you know? A whole other level.” Satsuki thought about that. “What?”

“Oh nothing, nothing,” She said mildly, instantly mollifying Ryuko – who just a bit on edge right now and got worried she’d said something wrong. “It just made me think of something Mataro said. That he has a separation between his normal life and fighting. Or - how did he put it - “The Prince” one hand and then just Mataro and Wakaiketsu on the other. He didn’t mean it as a negative, though. I thought that what he was trying to describe was the feeling of fighting as one with Wakaiketsu.”

That perked Ryuko up. “Really? You think?” She grinned. Mataro had made the breakthrough from working together to oneness? “I’ve gotta ask him about it!”

“Hmm-hmm,” Satsuki hummed, pleased with herself, “In any case, I suppose when you’ve already had a pretty adventurous life, you might feel quite a clean break between your normal self and when you’re one with your kamui.”

Ryuko looked down, her smiling turning wistful, “Well, yeah I can see that. But that’s not the way it went for me. For me, when I’m in battle is when I feel the most like myself. ‘Specially with Senketsu. Don’t, uh, don’t tell anyone that though. Anybody other than you’d maybe get the wrong idea.”

Satsuki smiled, pulled Ryuko closer and brushed the stray hair from her forehead, “Of course, I understand completely. But for the others, I wonder which way they tend to feel about – oh, hold that thought.” An alert had just appeared on her tablet. “It’s Nonon, calling to report in.”

Ryuko went stiff for just a moment. Satsuki side-eyed her, “You’re not going to do that thing where you keep trying to react as you listen in, are you?”

“No! Honest!” Ryuko exclaimed, “Can’t stop me from listenin’ though.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Satsuki said, and she answered the call. Pressing her hand up to her earpiece, she said, “Nonon? I take it things have wrapped up at the lab... Okay... Oh, Okay! Wait, you really captured it? How?” Ryuko’s mouth was agape too “A secret plan, huh... Well, they learned from the best... And a couturière too... Yes, sentimental m-f-ers indeed,” Satsuki chuckled.

~ “*But, that’s not it,*” ~ Nonon said, tone suddenly dropping. Satsuki’s brow furrowed, and Ryuko’s fright was written all over her face. All day, the sinking feeling that something awful was about to happen had been building in Ryuko. Was this it? She braced for the worst. ~ “*Houka, he uh, he lost an eye.*” ~

“An eye.” The words dropped out of Satsuki’s mouth, completely deadpan.

Ryuko gasped, “No way!”

~ “*An eye. I’m serious.*” ~

“No, I didn’t mean it like that! It’s only that,” Satsuki glanced over at Ryuko, who was totally shocked, “I don’t think this was what either of us expected.” Ryuko nodded in vigorous agreement.

Nonon laughed morosely, ~ “*Yeah, I get that, I get that. Shit, we’re basically in the same place over here, what the hell are we even meant to do about it? He’s doing alright, condition stable, I guess. Shiro got done operating on him a bit ago, he’s still out though. But, still... I mean we all thought he was going to **die**, so I guess I’m relieved... But still!*” ~

“I know,” Satsuki nodded, “Something about losing an eye, it’s just so permanent feeling.”

“I was just thinking that!” Ryuko blurted, and it was true. *His face will never look the same, she was thinking, if he were dead, I might risk time travel for that. If I weren’t pregnant, I might risk time travel for that. Hell, if I weren’t pregnant, I could’ve stopped it! And now for the rest of his life, he’s down an eye. What will I say to him? That I could have been there to fight in his place, but just because I’m having a baby I couldn’t?* Not even Shiro, who held an even greater weight of guilt on his head, had made this connection. If he thought about how he convinced Ryuko to have her child now in the first place he would have been even more guilty, but not resisting Ranketsu was enough. For the rest, this was just an occupational hazard. They didn’t expect Ryuko to come save them, or blame her for not being there.

But she sure felt like they ought to.

“But how did it happen?” Satsuki asked.

~ “*Oh, it’s a long story. And I hear the bombs by you so you don’t have time for it, I think. Ah, so sum it up, he did something uncharacteristically stupid and ended up getting stuck in the trap with Ranketsu. Well, except, he did kind of probably save my life so maybe I can’t fairly say that. Anyway, he got stuck in there with her and that’s the important thing.*” ~

“Ah. Yes, I can picture that. We should be grateful that an eye is the extent of his injuries, I think,” Satsuki said philosophically.

~ “*I guess, but - oh, no that’s really not everything!*” ~ Nonon had abruptly changed her mind, there were things that Ryuko and Satsuki just needed to know, ~ “*Before that, we chased after the couturières and left Shiro and Houka to fight Ranketsu and, well you know what happened to me and Saiban when we were fighting Rosuketsu? Yeah, that kind of happened again,*” ~

“Oh, shit! No way!” That snapped Ryuko from her thoughts and she tilted her head in to hear closer.

~ “*So like, make sure to tell Ryuko she’s got to get ready to give them ‘the talk’. They won’t take ‘none of your business’ for an answer anymore I think I can guarantee that.*” ~

“Yeah, message received, totally,” Ryuko said, close to Satsuki’s ear.

~ “*Hi Ryuko. And there’s one last thing, Satsuki. You’re not gonna believe this... and I wouldn’t believe it if I weren’t holding it in my hand but... we have your sword, Satsuki.*” ~

Satsuki said, “I don’t take your meaning.”

~ “*It’s pretty literal, actually.*” ~

*Bakuzan!* Satsuki thought, but no. *There’s no way that’s what she meant.* She said, “Right, well, you can explain the details to me later I’m sure.”

~ “*Right, right,*” ~ Nonon chuckled. ~ “*Anyway, I’ll let you get back to work. Good luck, talk to you later.*” ~

“Well thanks for checking in. I hope you’re all getting some rest. You deserve it.”

When Nonon hung up, Satsuki shook her head with a ghost of a smile on her lips. “What?” Ryuko asked.

“What do you suppose she meant by that last part?” Satsuki replied.

“Beats the hell out of me.”

“Because I thought, somehow, that she meant Bakuzan. ‘My Sword’. But that’s impossible, right?” Ryuko nodded, “Right, because the shards of it sank in the Tokyo Bay along with Honnouji. It was what I wanted to blurt out, but I thought it would sound stupid. I probably shouldn’t be worried about looking stupid in front of Nonon, after everything.”

“Heh, nah I guess not.” After a moment, Ryuko said absently, “So... I guess that wasn’t it.”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, well it’s just,” Ryuko sheepishly rubbed the back of her head, “Talk about not looking stupid, but I’ve had this feeling today. I know it ain’t rational, but just this sense like I’m *sure* something bad is gonna happen. And I know, I know, it’s just because of the whole poisoning... thing, I know that’s what’s got me all paranoid but every time something happens, I’m sure *this* time it will be it. Like I was sure Mako was gonna get herself killed, you know? And now this.”

“I can understand that,” Satsuki agreed, “That call could easily have borne much worse news.”

“That’s the thing! Losing an eye, that’s *pretty* awful. But it’s like you said, at lot worse could’ve happened. And now here I am thinking, ‘well if that wasn’t it, then what will be’.”

Satsuki put an arm around her, pulled her close. She let her embrace soften Ryuko’s tension more than reassuring words could. No “*nothing’s going to happen, I promise,*”. This was their life, she couldn’t guarantee that.

What she could promise was, “Not to worry. Whatever happens, we’ll overcome it.”

~~~~~

Midnight

~~~~~

It hit Ryuko like a punch to her gut. Out over the ocean, something had just entered her aura-sensing range. Something huge.

“HIIEE!” She gasped, high and raspy. Satsuki immediately raced to her side; she had been looking inland, watching a flight of firefighting helicopters arrive to extinguish a burning artillery battery, and turned around just in time to see Ryuko crumple inward.

“Ryuko! What’s wrong!” Ryuko didn’t answer. Her hands curled over her chest and belly, her knees buckled inward. Sweat beaded on pale skin, her lips drew back in a grimace. “Just, just sit down! Try to breathe! I’ll call for help!”

“No no no no no, *not now!*” Ryuko mumbled, on the verge of tears. “Not now, *please!*” She didn’t want to believe what she was feeling, but this presence was undeniable. Not quite the same, but deeply familiar. A scalding, heatless light. Not all-engulfing, but simply annihilating. She knew that presence, all too well. She could still feel the oily touch of its hands on her.

Satsuki had decided – not unreasonably – that Ryuko was going into labor. Her heart was suddenly pounding, drawn into the immediacy of the moment. That wasn’t going to shake her though. Ryuko wasn’t ready for this, that was obvious, and Satsuki had to be strong for her. *No wonder she was so worried about today! She must have known on some level this was happening,* Satsuki rubbed her back, trying to coax her to sit. *Oh, Ryuko! I wish I could take your place!*



She was quickly robbed of that sentiment. “H-Help?” Ryuko managed to squeak out, “Nobody can help! Who can help *me*!”

“Oh, Ryuko that’s not-,”

“-don’t you *feel* it?” She seized Satsuki’s arm, squeezing painfully tight. Her voice was a hiss, “*It’s a hybrid!*”

Now terror gripped Satsuki as her mind raced with the implications. She saw the frantic look in Ryuko’s eyes in a completely different light. “That’s impossible,” she said, flat and hard. But Ryuko was so palpably shaken, so terrified, “That’s *impossible*. You’ve got it wrong. Ryuko *look at me!*” She seized both Ryuko’s hands, brought their distraught faces together. As she pulled Ryuko’s right hand away the little funnel of life fibers that sprung from it was pulled taught and tremors rocked through her massive barrier. “Tell me you’ve got it wrong! Tell me that... that *she’s* not back!”

“No, no it’s not Ragyo! She’s still inside me, I completely broke her spirit. She probably doesn’t even remember her name,” A comment which might have provoked more questions in another situation, “No, trust me. It’s not her. They’ve made another one!” Satsuki’s eyebrows flew up, “They did!” She waved off Satsuki grip, storming off to the edge of the sea wall. “I don’t know how, I don’t know, they must’ve found someone compatible, but they *did* it! Trust me, I’d never mess this up. And now... Now she’s come to kill me!”

“I trust you!” Satsuki said fiercely. She was back in combat mode – if it wasn’t Ragyo, it was just another threat.

*She’s so brave*, Ryuko’s thought with a powerful pang in her chest, *She hasn’t realized just how screwed we are*. She hadn’t made the calculation that was giving Ryuko such utter terror, reached the conclusion that, “Agh! Don’t you see! Secret plans, invasions, they don’t care about any of that! That was just to soften us up, get everyone out of position so that I’d be on my own! Because they know, of course they know about... her!” She waved frantically at her belly. “And they think this is their one chance to take me out, and anything that could do that would be enough to mop everyone else up too!”

“Yes, Ryuko, I understa-“

“And you know they’re sure as shit right about that last part! Gah, Satsuki, what am I going to *do*!”

“But Ryuko you’re not alone!” Satsuki said, fire back in her eyes. She hadn’t come to battle unarmed. She had a small, hardened life-fiber blade, a Tanto, sent up from arsenal at the lab and she drew it now. “This is a shock, but we have five combat-ready kamui – not counting Mako – and myself right here, and four more at the lab. So let’s fall back there! Uzu on his own could definitely at least hold a hybrid back, you know that! He and the rest might be able to kill them outright.”

“*RUN!*” Ryuko was aghast. *You’re still not getting it!* Ryuko thought with mounting fury – not at Satsuki, really, just fury – *I need you to come up with a solution already!*

“Tactical retreat!” Satsuki shot back, “Don’t think of it that way, you know you can’t fight!”

“Well, *duh!* That’s the problem!” Ryuko fumed. Satsuki was taken aback and didn’t respond. Ryuko spoke with emphatic waves of her free hand, “I’m gonna run away, and let her kill everything in her way to get to me? Hell no! So I have to fight. I have to! I don’t care if they *can*, they’re not meant to fight a hybrid. That’s. My. Job. That’s the whole point of the Queen thing, having all these powers, so if we’re ever against a Ragyo-level threat I can do what I’ve got to. Right? And now I have to fight, but I can’t! It’s just like Nonon said!”

Now Satsuki got it, and her set and stiff determination visibly softened. Not that it really changed what she thought needed to be done, but Ryuko was right. It was their choice to have a child, and now because of it Ryuko couldn’t fight. They had put countless lives at risk, and that was just the short term. Who knew what a new hybrid might try to do, what plans REVOCS had for them, if they didn’t put them down quickly?

As for Ryuko, she was so painfully aware of her own vulnerability. Of how easily the tiny little life stirring inside her could be swiped out. She pictured it – she didn’t mean too but she couldn’t help it – all the gory details raced through her mind on a loop. In a fight between hybrids, of such scaled and magnitude, it would be almost incidental. Her belly would heal up in milliseconds like it had never happened. And this new hybrid, whoever she was, wouldn’t even mean it. But that cold, heartless aura that invaded all of Ryuko’s senses told her enough. It seemed to say, “*I will do whatever it takes to get to you. There is no mercy, no pity, no honor. You are my enemy, that is all.*”

She fought back the urge to vomit. Or burst into tears. But her voice cracked as she said, “And you know, it’s really such a normal fucking thing! To have a baby, isn’t that just a totally normal part of a totally normal life? But then *I* try to do that and now look! It’s either her life or...” She waved out over the fleet. And despite her best efforts, a few resolute droplets managed to squeeze out from her eyes.

Satsuki crept up and gently rubbed her back. “I know, I know,” She said softly, “And for something you didn’t want in the first place.”

Ryuko’s back suddenly stiffened. She turned back to Satsuki, forcibly blinking her tears away. *No, she feels guilty about this!* Ryuko realized, *She thinks if only she could have taken my place, this wouldn’t have happened!* That just wouldn’t do. Ryuko’s eyes were suddenly very flinty. “Yeah? Well *fuck that!* Fuck what I wanted then! You think that I regret it now!” She whirled on Satsuki, “That ain’t it at all!”

“I didn’t mean that...”

“I just... want her to be safe,” Ryuko finished. Satsuki didn’t say anything more, once again stunned by that sudden outburst. Yes, she was feeling a tremendous sense of guilt – if she were the one who couldn’t fight none of this would be happening. Yes, the exact same horrible vision that replayed over and over again in Ryuko’s head terrified her too. And yes, in the back of her mind she was still trying to find a way to get Ryuko to retreat. Just in case whatever she decided to do next turned out to be absolutely, monumentally stupid.

But Ryuko wasn’t thinking about any of that. She was looking out over the battle, over the fleet who were out there fighting and dying for her. At her friends, their kamui, battling through the hordes in total ignorance of the danger. She could feel them behind her. It was like her old middle school days; when an older, stronger kid dissed her she had to step up. Her little gang was watching. Sure, back then she couldn’t fairly call them friends, but she couldn’t let someone walk

all over them either. No matter what she wanted, she could feel their eyes on the back of her head. They were counting on her.

And she couldn't look like a bitch in front of them.

“Ryuko?”

She sighed and said, “Fuck it. If I'm bait, I'm bait. Get everyone on the comms, tell them what's coming. We'll just hope my barrier can hold her off long enough.” Satsuki nodded and complied. “But I can't run. Fight or not, I've got to face her. It's the only way. And besides, it's too late. She's coming.”

The horizon, which had been so clear when the REVOCS fleet first arrived, had been lost in the gloom. Overshadowed by stormclouds, obscured by roiling smoke, sea and sky had merged together into the distant darkness. But now, shafts of light rose above it, faint but growing in size and numbers. A rainbow, a kaleidoscope, a frightful host of disparate colors. With all the chaos of battle obscuring it, at first Satsuki thought her eyes deceived her. But soon the source itself, the great and terrible orb began to rise into view.

A midnight sun was rising over the battlefield.

~~~~~

As the midnight sun began to rise, the kamui felt its presence come. Uzu was deep in the flow of battle, leaping between scraps of shredded ships even as they hurtled through the air. It passed through Seijitsu to him and they both shuddered. Saiban sometimes referred to the aura's life-fibers radiated as their “scent”, and it wasn't far off – just like scent, the further away the source was the harder it was to pin down its location. He knew exactly where Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu were, and their auras were sharp and indurate, definitely not “alive” like a bonded kamui. The closest smell equivalent would be a cold mountain spring, flowing over raw rocks. Something inorganic and unchanging. But this new feeling was something else. Acrid, chemical. It was ammonia, sulfur, the scent of a scalding poison. It washed over him and made him sick to his stomach.

At the same moment, Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu backed off. They set down next to each other on a melted heap of slag that had probably once been a ship or something. The field of darkness they were creating collapsed, contracting into a nimbus around their bodies. Uzu landed on another across from them. They weren't the only ones to stop, the entire battle ground to a halt. Ships rolled slowly to a halt, guns ceased to fire, crews froze in place and the hordes of flying REVOCS cultists hovered where they were. Uzu saw Ira's massive *Kyojin* form stop, slowly rotating its head to the north. Above his furrowed brows Mako was a little pinprick, and further the rest of kamui had stopped too, wherever they were, even in the midst of combat. The only one who wasn't impressed was the ocean – Uzu and the enemy kamui had whipped it into terrible whirlpool and now it rushed back in, rolling between the shipwrecks like the constricting body of a gigantic snake. It splashed Uzu with towering waves of salt spray, but Seijitsu was in full swing now and it steamed off his body.

“What's wrong?” He taunted. Seijitsu remained in her new *Hari No Me* (“Eye of the Needle”) form. They sized up Yuriketsu and Sumiretsu together through the single eye that Seijitsu had in this form, planted on a visor over the top half of Uzu's face. Should they take the opportunity to go on the attack? “Getting tired?”

“Hmm? Oh, nah,” Yuriketsu said with a dainty giggle.

“Our work here is done, is all!” Sumiretsu added.

Well, that was ominous. “... Care to explain that?” He kept in his combat ready stance, alert for whatever came next.

“Mmmm nope!” Sumiretsu leapt into the air, followed by its twin, “Seeya!” And just like that they were gone, scudding off north as two bolts of fire in the night.

“Wha – Hey! Get back here!” Uzu made ready to spring after them. He shouted into his earpiece, “You guys see this? The enemy kamui are totally bailing on me! What the hell’s going on!”

~ “Uzu, stop!” ~ It was Satsuki, and the graveness of her voice confirmed Uzu’s instincts, ~ *“Break off your pursuit. All members of the Kamui Corps, stand by! If you are at the naval battle, you will already know that we have a new enemy fast approaching... and Ryuko has confirmed that... it is a new hybrid.”* ~

The open channel connected every one of them (who was conscious at the moment) and it burst into commotion. Shocked gasps, muttered and shouted expletives. The loudest was Mako, who shouted, “WHAT!” so loudly Uzu could swear he heard it for real over the thunder. But what he noticed was the absence of anything from Houka. No exclamations about how this was even possible, what it might mean. And very little from Shiro, either, just a single sharp, pained inhalation. As much as he ragged on them for nerding out mid-battle, it was disconcerting; something like this had to go remarked upon.

That fell to Tsumugu, ~ *“Say again, Satsuki! Do you mean that they have somehow revived Ragyo? That can’t be true, Ryuko would have known!”* ~

~ *“No! No, it’s not Ragyo, Ryuko was very clear on that. But as Ragyo said herself, to become a hybrid she gave herself over to the life-fibers, body and soul. If that were all it took, they would have done this much sooner. Whatever final piece they were missing, they got it today and the true motive behind this invasion now becomes clear.”* ~

~ *“Then... then what do we do?”* ~ Tsumugu was at a loss for words, but that didn’t break his usual stoicism. ~ *“Is there a risk it could restart the cocoon sphere?”* ~

~ *“Unknown. Shiro?”* ~ Satsuki asked.

Shiro spoke softly and with great hesitation, ~ *“I... ah... not without Shinra Koketsu... No, it shouldn’t. The entire world needed to be wearing REVOCS clothing.”* ~ That was true, and it was somewhat reassuring. They wouldn’t lose without even a chance to fight back. ~ *“But then, who knows? It’s so easy to underestimate them.”* ~

~ *“Right, well, nevertheless, we are operating under the assumption that it will target Ryuko first. She’s vulnerable right now, so we will be counting on all of you here to battle the hybrid together.”* ~

Nonon immediately took umbrage at this, ~ *“Oh, fuck that’s right! Where’s Ryuko now?”*  
~

~ “Well. She is right here.” ~

~ “Well **Jesus** Satsuki, what the hell is she doing there?” ~ Nonon shouted, ~ “She should be on her way here! Or like, flying over the ocean at mach 12 until this is over! Don’t tell me she’s really – oh, just put her on!” ~

Back on the seawall, Ryuko had been too agitated to put her own earpiece in – she didn’t want the chatter interrupting her thoughts. But now she relented and clicked it in place. ~ “Yeah.” ~ She said into it tersely. Uzu wasn’t the only one who’s heart sunk. They’d seen Ryuko at her lowest, and now they heard the hoarse growl creeping into her voice.

~ “So hey, I was just wondering, like, **what the hell are you thinking!**” ~ Nonon spat out, ~ “At least tell me you’re not planning to **fight**, right?” ~

~ “Of course not! How could you think that? But what am I supposed to do, run? What if it caught up, I’d be d-defenseless!” ~ It was clearly difficult for Ryuko to get the word out, ~ “And wouldn’t that be nice! See I’ve thought about this!” ~

Nonon didn’t have anything to say to that, so Satsuki took over again, ~ “That’s correct, Ryuko will remain here to draw the hybrid’s attention. Her barrier will buy crucial time while they try to go through or around it. Once you have intercepted them, then she **will** fall back. All clear?” ~

Nervous though they were, they all shouted back that they were ready. After the earpiece clicked off, Uzu turned to watch as the midnight sun rose. Some of the other kamui flitted down: first Rei and then Tsumugu a moment later. All the REVOCS warriors were watching the hybrid approach like deer in headlights, they didn’t exactly try anything. The both of them were doing a good job keeping their emotions under control, faces set and stoic, but Furashada and Reiketsu were practically radiating tension and anger.

The “sun” was now fully above the horizon. Its rays split apart into a rainbow at the fringes, but in the center they came together into pure, blinding white. “Yeah, that looks pretty familiar,” Uzu remarked. “Hey, um, are you guys like, okay?”

“Hm? Oh, as good as can be,” Rei managed a thin smile, “I think I get how you all felt, back then. Just one thing after another.”

“Heh, you got that right,” Tsumugu chuckled morosely, “Actually I was just thinking of something that Ryuko said to me once. About not putting life off until our wars are over. She must have known, even then, that the life-fibers weren’t going to stop coming so easily. Maybe we should actually feel good about that, it means that we’ve shaken their iron grip on the universe. That’s what Ryuko thinks, at least. But that also means that this fight won’t end with us, we can’t just save the Earth once and call it quits the life-fibers will keep trying and they are very patient. Humanity’s age of innocence is over.”

Uzu blinked, “... Right. I was kind of more talking about like, y’know trauma from last time and all that.”

“Oh. Well yeah, there’s that too,” Tsumugu shook his head sheepishly.

“Honestly, I’m more worried for Ryuko. She didn’t sound okay, did she?” Rei said. “I mean, each of us have weapons that can kill hybrids,” she disconnected the two blades of her axe to

demonstrate, “And we’ve trained with Ryuko plenty, we’re all as ready as possible. I might be stealing the words from your mouth, but for us this is just another battle. For her though, and for Satsuki...

“That’s right,” Tsumugu nodded, “And it’s a shame because I think what she said was a pretty good point. But here she is, trying to live her life, not put it off. And just for that her child is endangered. And how could Ryuko possibly take that well?”

~~~~~

Tsumugu was not wrong, at that very moment Ryuko was steaming over with rage. It was all well and good to feel a detached kind of sadness about the misguided REVOCS true believers when they were the clearly weaker side, but now that had changed. *I should have just fought them all myself from the beginning.* She thought, *They were never going to let me step back, be with Satsuki, let the others be the heroes this time. I’ll always be at the center of it, I should have known that.* This was her tactical analysis, she reviewed everything that had happened ever since the enemy kamui first attacked and came to this conclusion: *If they can find a way to eliminate me, then they stand a chance of killing everyone else too. And they hate me enough that they’ll never stop trying to do it. Whoever that is coming at me now, they hate me with every fiber of their being. Is this my fault? Is it my fault I let the others have their chance to be the heroes, that I married Satsuki and started a family, that I took a well-deserved break from the front line?* She just couldn’t accept it. *No. No! It’s their fault!*

*But I was wrong to think that this little cleanup operation and the real fight, against the Life-fibers and their master, were separate. That I could just put things off until I was ready. It was too good to be true, I gave them time to do this. Now I know better.*

Armed with that sobering assessment, Ryuko watched the arrival of her new enemy. The dazzling midnight sun blasted right through the center of the fleet, right over Uzu, Rei, and Tsumugu’s heads. The ships groaned as they parted, lifted by huge swells of water projected away from it by raw force. She – Ryuko had intuitively known it would be a she – halted only a few hundred yards in front of Ryuko’s barrier. Ryuko could feel her radiant heat beating against the life-fiber skin of the barrier.

And now she could finally see the hybrid herself. She was shocked. That this woman would resemble Ragyo with the rainbow glow to her hair and the cold gaze of imperial serenity was no surprise. She had imagined all that. But that she would look *so* much like her, in fact so much like *Satsuki*, it didn’t make any sense. Like Satsuki she was tall and voluptuous, she had the same perfectly toned body and even the same flowing lengths of hair Satsuki had in the old days – only hers was blonde which only made the glow even more brilliant. It was haloed in gold. And for a moment Ryuko’s rage nearly boiled over because she thought – it was all she could think – that this bitch was using the form-changing power Nui had to impersonate Satsuki just to rattle her (and she was hyper, hyper fixated on spotting any tricks).

But no, on closer inspection that wasn’t quite right. They were very similar; the stormy eyebrows, the dainty chin, the eyes staring with bold contempt. But they weren’t quite the same; indeed by a conventional standard she might have surpassed Satsuki for raw beauty just slightly, if she did not lack that uniqueness that lends true perfection. Her skin was smoother - too smooth, inhumanly so even. Her cheeks were softer, more supple and rounded, her lips fuller and bright red. But she had a thin, pinched cast to her face that made her stare down her tall nose even more than Satsuki did, and with that came an air of natural disdain and cruelty that even while smiling

never fully went away. She was not so much a woman but the image of one, emerged from the reliefs of Thebes or Delphi complete with a cold serenity born of watching and waiting for eons.

“W-what the!” Ryuko gasped.

“My god! It’s Minazuki!” Satsuki was no less breathless. “Rosuketsu’s host, my cousin, remember?”

“Yeah, I got it!” Ryuko did remember the whole thing. Including that Minazuki was one of the vapid Kiryuin aristocrats who had nothing to do with Ragyo, but then was radicalized later *after* they showed her mercy. *What kind of fucking freak does that?* She cleared her throat and shouted at the top of her lungs, “So what? You got a problem with me too now? Losing your arm wasn’t enough, huh?”

Still cold and serene, Minazuki lifted her hand before her. It had healed, regrown from the point midway up the humerus where Nonon had cut it off. But it looked different, there was a sort of sheen to it. It glittered with streaks and twinkles, reflected light from the rainbow glow of her hair. It increased in intensity further down her arm, until her hand was so consistently shiny that it seemed wrapped in a skintight plastic glove. Her fingers were unnaturally long as well, each joint stretched beyond its natural bounds. Besides that, she was dressed not in a kamui, but like the Minazuki Satsuki knew. A garish, baroque gown of silk and lace and embroidered gold flowers, sleeveless and low cut. It extended past her feet, revealing only the curves of her thighs and calves and fluttering in the breeze below pointed toes. Around her neck she wore a fluffy white fur scarf, traced through with jagged red patches of life-fibers. And her hair was bedecked with a dense net of gemstones, diamonds and pearls, all braided in together. It was the way they refracted her lights that made the various beams spin and dance so violently.

“My problem? Forgive me Matoi, but you misunderstand. You think that I have come to settle a petty grudge?” She barely repressed a giggle. “That I surpassed my humanity just to avenge a family fortune? My bruised ego? Perhaps once... but no, I am too enlightened for that. I... am an instrument.”

“W-what? Satsuki,” Ryuko glanced over at Satsuki.

“That’s not Minazuki,” Satsuki murmured distantly.

Ryuko felt like her neck was crushing in on itself. Her voice, already stretched unnaturally loud, gradually rose until she was yelling. Everyone on the battlefield could hear the words the hybrids exchanged reverberating in their heads, though they may not have understood it all. “So, you know you’re hollowed out like Ragyo, huh? I’m not talking to Minazuki, I’m talking to **them**, right? IS THAT WHAT YOU’RE TRYING TO TELL ME?”

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose so,” Minazuki seemed pleased with that and kept talking at a quick, bubbly pace, “Indeed I am an instrument of the life-fibers. No free will of my own, no use pretending otherwise. But I’m not a slave, I ought to clear that up before we try to kill each other. I’ve never felt so free before, really? I mean who wouldn’t? I understand the whole of the cosmic order, and my place in it. Who wouldn’t feel just so *free*?”

“No free will, and you’re not a slave?” Ryuko growled, “You’re insane.” *Satsuki, please. Get the others on the attack, now! I need to see Uzu slice this bitch’s head off!*

But Satsuki wasn't talking on her earpiece. The moment Minazuki began to speak, she felt sick. Nausea rolled up from the depths of her belly, her head felt like it had been electrocuted. *Oh no, no no no not NOW!* Satsuki wanted to cry out, but she couldn't. She knew exactly what was happening to her, but try as she might she couldn't fight it. "Ryuko!" She hissed desperately. Ryuko was not listening.

Minazuki sighed, "Ah, well I can't say I'm surprised *you* don't understand. You are the one who preserved this planet past its appointed end, you are the one who intends to live forever. Who intends for her *daughter* to live forever. Are you not, Ryuko Matoi? Well think on this: if you truly intend to live forever then you shall be battling the life-fibers, the *law* of the universe, forever! Do you truly believe that you will never lose? You have no future, do you underst--"

"-SHUT UP! Don't you DARE speak of her!" Ryuko raged, pointing an angry finger at Minazuki. "Don't you dare speak of her when she's the only reason you're not dead already! I should have known it wasn't just REVOCS coming for me today, even they might've waited! But how can you have honor when you're not even human!"

"Ryuko *run!*" Satsuki was in a full panic, though she could never admit it to herself. *She's goading you, don't you see!* Satsuki fought as hard as she could, focused on her breathing, on her white knuckled grip on her knife. A simple technique she'd honed since childhood, but now it did nothing. *No! Be strong! Be strong for Nozomi!*

Minazuki however was completely undeterred. "But how can I not speak of your daughter, when she is the one I came here to kill? Oh, it's nothing personal, you simply have no future and I as an instrument of the life-fibers must see that done.," She said it with such cheery nonchalance. In her left hand – the one which hadn't been removed and regrown – a life-fiber weapon exploded to full size. A longsword with a delicate thin blade, a curved hilt, and on the pommel a shorter but no less needle-like second blade. She brandished it with a smile, all velvety politeness, "I won't deny, Ryuko Matoi, you may kill me today. You have grown frightfully powerful, and I compliment you for that. But should I die, I will do so having accomplished my mission. After all," she grinned, "I'd really love to *see* the latest member of the Kiryuin Clan for myself."

And Ryuko quite simply saw red.

~~~~~

Witnessing Ryuko attack, holding nothing back, was terrifying. Doubly so because all of her friends and family, all of the soldiers staring dumbstruck at Minazuki, everyone around heard the exchange between them and understood what was at stake. They were sure they were about to witness the bloody, premature death of her unborn daughter. But there was one thing Ryuko had neglected to tell them. She thought it was obvious.

If it weren't for Nozomi she truly would have slaughtered Minazuki without any trouble.

"**RRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!**" She roared. A pulse of bright blue light flashed from her eyes and the lights in her hair exploded to life. All the black was eradicated, red become orange became yellow and at the very roots white hot; her hair stood on end in a voluminous mane that danced like raw fire. She pulled her fists back, elbows pressed at her sides as if fighting to contain her power. But she wasn't fighting at all. Her barrier fell, its intricate patterns curling into a huge vortex and vanishing back into her hand.



At the same moment her Kisaragi wings bloomed from behind her shoulders. But not just the six leaf-shaped wings from before, another layer unfolded into existence between them and extending out. And then another and another on and out, like rows of serrated teeth sizzling the air. With each pass they propagated and filled in every recess, first six then nine then twelve and so on. In the end there were dozens of layers, hundreds of individual wings, stretching yards across and pressing up against the seawall below. Behind them, a series of concentric rings yawned out from her, each slotting into place at the widest point of a layer. Where they intersected, the patterns traced in burning orange on each wing unwound, and bright blue blazed into existence. Eyes. Ryuko's gigantic, incorporeal eyes each with a deep navy pupil with huge spokes that seemed to in fold in endlessly. Sparks crackled through the around her and her skin itself began to glow as her power turned the air to plasma. Her body was now only the core of a halo of radiant energy, an alien peacock tail.

"RYUKO NO!" Satsuki yelled. Overcome with panic, she rushed forth to try to grab Ryuko. But her legs gave way. *No! Move move move!* No amount of will was going to move her body now. All the multicolored light coming off Ryuko and Minazuki was an incomprehensible smear in her eyes, the only sound she heard was her own racing heartbeat. She didn't even realize she was falling, her body felt so distant. The last thing she saw was Ryuko spring off, shaking the entire seawall as she and her wings became a thick column of light.

Then she passed out.

Ryuko crossed the gap instantly. She was standing on the seawall, then she was floating before Minazuki. Or rather, where Minazuki had been. Ryuko punched her, using a full rotation of her body to pound right down onto her skull, she felt it crunch before her. She tilted so far in the follow-through that her wings were now nearly horizontal, staring towards the waves below. *\*BOOM!\** Minazuki offered no resistance. She crashed down into the sea with such speed that she hit the bottom – she blasted away the water with such force that the seafloor itself was exposed, all glistening black rock.

The ground shook. The seawall crumbled apart in several places, and smoke and explosions rolled away inland as buildings were toppled by a powerful quake. That probably saved Satsuki's life, because Minazuki's fall produced an effect as if a bomb had landed. More a gigantic ripple, a tsunami, than a splash, it was a perfectly circular wall of water rising several stories into the air. It washed across the ocean, foundering several REVOCS battleships. But when it reached the seawall, it surged through the cracks and into the town rather than washing over the top. And at the bottom of the crater Minazuki lay, a glowing wad of pulped flesh and life-fibers. Slowly piecing itself back together.

But Ryuko wasn't done. She pointed her hand down and without any charge-up time a beam of blue light raced from it. She had known she could do this for a while now, but there was never any call to use it. From what the scientists told her about the REVOCS kamui's lasers, if a beam broke through a kamui's energy field it would incinerate the person below instantly. That had no place on the sparring grounds. But now she didn't care anymore. The light engulfed Minazuki, and she bared her teeth and screamed at the top of her lungs, "**RRRAAAA! AAAAAAA! DIEEEEEEEE!**"

The sea contracted back into place, a giant maelstrom collapsing into the open crater. For a brief, frozen moment it washed around the column of blue light, steaming as it was vaporized. But then from deep below there was a pulse of light. Ryuko blinked, her mouth hung slightly open

as she failed to process what she was seeing. Her laser, she could see it splitting off in several directions and lighting up the water. It was being... deflected?

Then the splitting point rose, then broke above the surface. Minazuki had reformed, clothing and all, and was racing back up at her! It was her hardened life-fiber blade that deflected the laser, she held it aloft before her as she flew up. Her serene face was now shadowed with rage. Ryuko stopped her laser and instinctively assumed a combat ready stance. But instinct was all she had, there was not a thought running through her head besides the word she screamed.

**“DIEEEEE!”**

*\*PING!\**

A baseball bat interrupted Minazuki’s flight, slammed right into her face and crunched it up into a mess of blood and teeth. She went sailing back down into the waves, and after her thundered a dozen thick bolts of lightning from all angles, furiously pounding the surface of the ocean.

“Mako!” Ryuko gasped, jerking her head up. It took her a second to process what she was seeing; she’d never imagined Mako floating high in the sky amidst a battle, hair swirling and wreathed in Tonbo’s power.

“Ryuko my *God!*” Mako shouted. She’d made it just in time, and now was floating before Ryuko breathless and beet red.

“Mako I-,” There were tears stinging Ryuko’s eyes, running down her cheeks and sizzling away before they could drop, “I’m okay!”

“Forget about you! What about the baby!”

*The baby!* Ryuko went bone white. Her hands immediately flew to her belly in such a dead panic that it physically hurt. At first, she was so frantic she couldn’t even tell what was happening. But no, there was the same steady heartbeat, the same sporadic movements. “She’s alright,” Ryuko sighed, relief washing over her, “She’s alright.”

Then Mako slapped Ryuko, hard. Ryuko gasped, Mako had put a bit of superhuman force into it and Ryuko actually recoiled. That finally snapped Ryuko out of combat mode and fully back to her senses. Mako was furious with her! She had never seen her look like this before: brow furrowed, face red, struggling not to cry, hands curled into little fists, trembling with rage. And it wasn’t like she didn’t know why. *What am I DOING!*

“What’s wrong with you! You *promised* you weren’t going to fight!”

“Mako...”

“You promised! And now look! Look what happened to Satsuki!” She pointed, and Ryuko whirled around to see Satsuki laying on her side on the seawall, limbs splayed everywhere. Aikuro was crouching over her, gently taking her pulse.

“AAAH!” Ryuko let out a scream raw with panic and instantly dashed back over to the seawall. “Wha- what the – how did!” She was beside herself and couldn’t get a full sentence out to Aikuro.

“She’s not hurt,” He said urgently, picking up Satsuki’s limp body and gently handing her to Ryuko, “Can’t say for sure, but I think... she had a panic attack.” Ryuko shot him an incredulous look, and he said, “What do you want me to say?”

“Oh, *Sats*,” Ryuko murmured tenderly, still crying without even noticing it, then to Aikuro said, “This is all my fault!”

“Yeah, well. There’s no time for that though, just do the right thing and run for the lab!” When Ryuko hesitated for even a split second, he said, “Go! We’ll handle it!”

She didn’t waste any more time debating. Ryuko jumped into the air, and then she was gone. Just a thin red line that darted off past the horizon faster than even the kamui could follow.

## Chapter End Notes

FINALLY!

# Part One of the Great Battle for the Future

October 2068

~~~~~

12:05 am

~~~~~

~ “Uzu! Uzu! Talk to me, what’s going on!” ~

“Nonon, it’s Aikuro! Uzu is a bit busy!” Aikuro pressed a hand to his earpiece and shouted over the roar of the waves and battle. He wasn’t kidding, right in front of him Uzu was locked in midair battle with Minazuki. Just after Mako knocked Minazuki into the sea and Ryuko fled, it was as if everyone had suddenly remembered how to move and act again. Uzu was right there, ready to intercept Minazuki’s wrath – now redirected at Mako. Now they whirled about, heedless of everything but avoiding each other’s lethal blows. Uzu had once again split his katana into two and at every turn moved to deal a cross-cutting blow, slashing outward with both – their edges pressed together squealed and kicked up a flurry of sparks. Every feint, every riposte was part of a plan to get just a moment where Minazuki could not parry, where he could dive in and land this single, brutal killing move. He’d practiced it against Ryuko with ordinary steel blades many times.

But it had one weakness. In the same moment that he lifted his elbows high and whipped them away, he completely exposed his chest. And Minazuki didn’t care if one blade cut her, not at all. She merely had to block one of them, receive a blow from the other, and then with her free hand punch right at Uzu’s ribcage. Her shiny, plasticky fingers were already long and they seemed in those moments to stretch, thrusting out at him. But that was the only time she used them, in fact her fighting pose used only her sword hand. Unless she needed it her free hand was curled up behind her back, like a fencer. It seemed that she had grown accustomed to not having it, even though it was regrown. She was faster than him, and while far from as good a duelist as Uzu, she was good enough to take advantage of it and that forced him to dash backwards; she rushed after and then Uzu was on the defensive and had to start all over. They repeated this dance and reached the same impasse over and over in the short time it took Aikuro to say, “He’s fighting Minazuki right now!”

~ “Oh. Well good, better than nothing! So fill us in, what’s going on?” ~

Aikuro quickly reported how it all went down. He kept to relevant details only and in no time was explaining, “...And that’s when Ryuko really lost it! She jumped out at Minazuki before anyone could stop her, I don’t know what would’ve happened if Mako hadn’t thrown herself between them! And at the same time, Satsuki just collapsed!” He heard Nonon gasp and said, “I know, right? I was on my way to help anyway so I went over, couldn’t find anything physically wrong with her. I know it’s hard to believe, but I think she had some kind of panic attack!”

~ “Oh, shit!” ~ Nonon exclaimed, ~ “I’ve seen that before! One time, Ryuko and I were sparring, and I cut Ryuko’s head off, and then I turned around and she was on the ground!” ~

Aikuro suddenly felt a deep pang of guilt that tugged at his gut, because, “Yeah, I remember. I was there too!” He rubbed his face, struggling to process this, then sighed and said, “But I just thought it was a one-time thing!” That Satsuki had such a mundane fallibility was hard to accept.

~ “*We all did. But now I see. She’d never admit to it, even to herself, but she probably is still terrified of anything that reminds her of Ragyo. Makes sense, right? The moment when she cut Ragyo’s head off and she still survived, that was the worst moment of her life I’m sure. But she doesn’t know how to handle it! She won’t let herself show such an irrational fear, but she can’t stop feeling it, and so she just shuts down!*” ~ Nonon explained it quickly, everything becoming clear to her in a rush.

“... You sure it’s not just when she thinks Ryuko is going to die?”

~ “*Rrgh! Same difference! But, anyway, go on! What next!*” ~

Aikuro told her the rest. Mako slapping some sense back into Ryuko, Ryuko grabbing Satsuki and zooming off for the lab at top speed, Uzu leaping in to take over for Mako. “And the worst part is,” He said, “Seeing Minazuki, and then seeing Ryuko run away, it really gave the REVOCS army a shot in the arm!”

~ “*Oh no...*” ~

“ ‘Fraid so. Can you hear that?’ Nonon couldn’t, but he could. Over the howling wind, between crashes of thunder, came singing. A hymn, strained and distorted by the percussion of battle. “They’re stalling Rei and Ira, otherwise they would have joined Uzu already!” He could see them too, Rei a blazing purple bolt in the distance that darted this way and that, trying to find a way through the glittering purple swarms. Ira was surrounded by them too, his titanic body washed over by their airborne formations. They weren’t probing for weaknesses anymore, but just smashing into him with reckless abandon. He was having a hard time advancing, REVOCS was actually plowing ships directly into his way, and by the time he smashed them or hurled them clear, another was crashing into his granite knees. Mako was there helping him too, and though she wasn’t visible occasional bolts of lightning through the storm were. “And Tsumugu is repelling boarders from the fleet, but even so they’ve been forced into a fighting retreat!”

~ “*Geez...*” ~ Nonon groaned. She didn’t say anything else for a second, she was weighing things up. Then she said, ~ “*Alright. You’re there, so tell me just how strong this bitch seems to be. Can we take her?*” ~

“I dunno, in raw power definitely at least what Ragyo had. Doesn’t seem like she’s a master duelist, but she’s crafty, Uzu is landing hit after hit on her and she just soaks them up. Uses her own body to catch his blow, stop the cross-cut,” Aikuro had been carefully watching the high-speed battle, he was planning to get involved in just a moment. “She knows how to use her regeneration; I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ryuko exploit it like this!”

~ “*I see. Any other powers, tricks to be aware of?*” ~

“Not yet.”

~ “*Then you know what to do. Kill her if you can, but above all buy some time! We will work out a plan!*” ~

Aikuro shouted, “Got it! But one more thing: if Ryuko were able to fight her without holding back, she wouldn’t stand a chance. Of that, I’m certain!”

~ “*Well, that’s good. But I don’t see how that really helps us when goading Ryuko into fighting and killing her baby is her primary goal.*” ~

“Not saying it does!”

~ “*But, maybe there is a way. She has some time manipulation abilities, maybe she can skip herself forward to after the kid’s out somehow.*”

Aikuro shook his head, “No, that’s just what I’m trying to say! Ryuko knows that too. One thing about Ryuko, you can trust her not to abuse her powers unless she’s sure it’s justified. That’s a pretty high bar, but this leaps right over it! If she’s cornered, there’s no telling what she could do! If she loses Nozomi, she could jump us back in time who knows how far to fix it. Maybe days, maybe before she got pregnant even, who knows. We could lose months of our lives, months of *everyone’s* lives!”

~ “*Fuck!*” ~ Nonon spat the word out, ~ “*What the **fuck!***” ~

“Yeah. So just *be careful*,” he said, “Knowing Ryuko, she’s already figured this all out, in fact I bet that was what set her off. It’s not her fault, she’s just... well, you know.”

~ “*Alright. Thank you, seriously. Good luck,*” ~ And Nonon’s line clicked off.

Aikuro sighed, he separated his bow into its knife form and said to Nekketsu, “Well, this is gonna get hairy. You ready?”

[*Those things you said about Mother, do you really think she’d do that?*] Nekketsu asked, as ever all innocence. [*She wouldn’t do that to us.*]

“Yeah, I do. Even if it haunted her forever. Some things are just too important to her.”

Nekketsu made a noise like a gulp. Aikuro could feel Minazuki’s chilling aura rattling through her. But the thought of Ryuko driven past the point of despair, in spite of all her godlike power, was more than enough to overcome it. [*Then it’s even more important that we win!*] The thrusters on Aikuro’s backfired, clean blue cones of flame that lifted him like he weighed nothing at all and sent him roaring into battle.

Uzu sensed his approach. He made an opening by dashing around behind Minazuki, who turned to face him. And in that moment Aikuro raked his knives across her back and two fountains of blood erupted. He used a reverse grip, so it was easy to yank them right up and at the end, to draw them together across the back of her neck. But he wasn’t able to score a crosscut because Minazuki threw an elbow back, oblivious to the damage she was taking, and he jerked back to avoid it. He watched as her skin and clothes sealed back up, the blood flicking off as though they were hydrophobic.

Uzu kept fighting, and didn’t waste any words, “Buy time, she said?”

“Yeah, but I say kill her now!” Aikuro shouted back.

“Agreed!” Uzu knew he could do it. He was so close; he could taste it! And with Aikuro’s support, his options suddenly widened. He held Minazuki’s attention for the most part, landing slices and stabs that would have been lethal against even another kamui wearer, sometimes just for the hell of it. It felt like stabbing into tar, the fur scarf and the dress she wore had a velcro grippyness to them. Aikuro buzzed around; his four thrusters angled independently and allowed him to zip in and strike just when she was busy blocking Uzu. It still wasn’t enough, but every now and then she made a break for it, trying to blast past them and fly further inland. *She doesn’t want to be fighting us*, he realized, though she was in no mood to monologue to him, *She’s trying to get away and go after Ryuko!*

And the more he and Seijitsu analyzed her moves, the more that conclusion sunk in. *[She’s preoccupied,]* Seijitsu said, *[She’s distracted! And she’s no kamui, she thinks like a human, that’s our advantage!]*

After another furious exchange, Aikuro abruptly dove in from above. This time, he plunged a knife right through her blonde hair and into her skull. She was uncorked like a champagne bottle and blood erupted out, but it didn’t bother her any. Uzu tried to use the moment to cross-cut her throat but she blocked his left sword with her and the other one caught in her scarf. So instead he yelled “DOWN!” and Aikuro understood. All of his thrusters fired downward at once and he raced towards the sea, yanking Minazuki’s head backwards. She was turned upside down and dragged headfirst with him. Uzu swooped out and then when they were just above the waves with a single beat of Seijitsu’s wings he lanced back in. His first strike she deflected, but the second one right after drove right through Minazuki’s gut – he actually heard a grunt of frustration from her! Right over Aikuro’s head he carried her, and she slammed right into the seawall, or rather one part of it that hadn’t been destroyed.

**\*BOOM!\***

Minazuki’s impact created a massive crater, so large the inland side of the wall buckled. And then the whole thing collapsed into a heap of rubble, dust, and salt spray.

She was alone in the dust cloud, whipping her head around to spot her opponents. And then she wasn’t, Uzu was right behind her and without hesitation he dropped one katana onto her arm and sliced her head off with the other. Just as quickly he kicked her now removed hand and that pesky sword away, and it sailed down towards the rushing water. She looked at him with wide, horrified eyes. “Disarmed!” he shouted, “NOW!”

Aikuro raced in, fists crossed in front of him so he was ready to score the decisive cross-cut. The single remaining thread that connected Minazuki’s head to her body glistened in the night. But he was still a few dozen feet away when she whipped up her still-attached hand and those long, shiny fingers rocketed towards him. Their slight extra length turned out to be the least of what they could do, they stretched until any semblance of fingers was gone and they were five fleshy whips lashing out at him. Before Aikuro even knew what was happening they had seized around his neck. He gasped as they closed, wrapping around and around and constricting him swiftly and efficiently. In no time his face was growing red and he couldn’t manage any noise besides a gurgle.

“Shit!” Uzu was quick to react and was about to slice the fingers off. But he hesitated when his instincts screamed danger, and rightly so because Minazuki’s sword hand was determined to return to its owner. Life-fiber threads leapt out from within it, connected to the disconnected stump of her upper arm and then reeled it in. It slashed at Uzu on its way back up, and when he blocked it something else flashed up and caught a counterattack with his other katana. The blade on the end

of her hilt, there was a tiny hinge that let it fly up! When he dashed back, the two snapped together. They fit perfectly.

*[That's... a one-handed scissor blade!]* Seijitsu saw the contraption clearly. There were two tiny holes on either side of a hinge in the center of the hilt. When it was open all the way they were barely noticeable because all the pieces fit together so well. But now that the scissor was closed they stood out, about the size of the finger and thumb holes on regular sewing scissors. Uzu shuddered. That was an elegant, devilishly efficient weapon, even an improvement over the original. *[So this is what they've made to kill Mother!]*

Aikuro was a flailing whirlwind. He kept slicing one finger or another but he could never get them all at once and they kept regenerating, and thrusting around to shake her grip wasn't working. The spray of blood from all the cut fingers tumbling around him was blinding, and try as he might he couldn't manage to draw a bead on one and cross-cut it. Uzu was about to lunge over to cut him free, but before that something else intervened. A gigantic slab of metal twenty or more feet wide suddenly cut off his view of Minazuki. And with it her fingers. They released their hold around Aikuro's neck, and he ripped them away and flung them. He sucked in greedy breaths as he watched the slab of metal crash into the waves and kicked up a tremendous wall of water. Aikuro blinked. *The bow of a ship? No, it's much too thin!*

It lifted back up, steaming seafoam pouring off it. A sword, a curved blade the length of a battleship that glistened blue-black. And at the end of it an equally titanic fist. "Ira!"

**"ABOUT TIME!"** Ira's voice boomed. He stood over them, in water that only came up to his ankles. His chest as wide as a mountain, his blazing orange eyes and golden hair, and that deep, stone-set scowl. He lifted his No-dachi, the same as ever except its insane upscaling, and rested it across his shoulders.

"Whoa-ho-ho ho YEAH!" Uzu hooted. He beamed as he thought, *We've got her now!*

~ *"I'm here too!"* ~ Mako shouted. She was still quite far away, a lightning bug drifting around Ira's shoulder. She fended off the last REVOCS flyers who had managed to chase Ira, hurling them into the distance with hollow pings from her bat.

**"YOU LIKE IT? I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS POSSIBLE MYSELF,"** He dropped it into his palm, admiring it. It seemed to have grown by splitting into segments, like fish scales, and each of them was wonderfully smooth. The whole motion was so fast - the speed at which a regular-sized human would have done it - that it kicked up shockwaves that ripped through the air. **"BUT DESPERATE TIMES..."**

"Tch!" Minazuki made an annoyed noise. She had no interest in wasting any more time. The moment her fingers had finished regenerating she was zooming off over the ground, heading southward.

"Wha-hey!" Uzu shouted indignantly, "Don't let her run!"

~ *"On it!"* ~ Tsumugu had also just arrived, swooping in from the east where he had just finished covering the fleet's retreat. He dive-bombed Minazuki from the clouds, anticipating her flight path and hurling out a cone of missiles before him that exploded in midair to create an inferno of fire. Every part of town that hadn't been burned down by artillery bombardment or swept away when the seawall broke was obliterated. When Tsumugu and Minazuki emerged again they were locked in combat, but he still managed to shout ~ *"Let's do this! Together!"* ~



“Right!” Aikuro chased off after them, and the rest weren’t far behind. Aikuro and Uzu took up places on either side of Ira and he lurched forward, clearing the seawall in a single stride. They all shouted together:

“NOW IT’S REALLY ON!”                      “NOW IT’S REALLY ON!”                      **“NOW IT’S REALLY ON!”** ~ “*NOW IT’S REALLY ON!*” “~

~~~~~

12:30 am

~~~~~

“How much longer?”

“Well, online it says it takes about an hour and half for a plane to get from Hokkaido to Tokyo, and Ryuko goes about three times as fast as a plane,” Mataro scratched his head, “So she should get here any second.”

Yuda looked unimpressed, “What kind of plane?”

“I dunno, a plane!”

“Because if you just googled flight lengths then it probably includes taking off and landing and –“

He stopped talking as he saw a brilliant red streak of light crest the horizon from the north. The sound followed shortly after, first the same sort of whine a plane makes as it passes overhead, but it built to a flat crack like a bullet as Ryuko zoomed overhead. They watched her bank around and begin a wide descending arc through the night sky. “That funny,” Mataro said, “She usually doesn’t mind stopping on a dime.”

“All that momentum, that might not be good for the baby,” Nonon said. She was laying down, Saiban powered off, and now made an effort to stand. The lab’s systems were back up and running and had constructed a sort of makeshift hospital room on the surface. Well, more of just a plinth of smooth white tile, on which two beds lay with some monitoring computers on either side. Houka was in the other, drifting somewhere between unconsciousness and waking. He was on a morphine drip, there were several other IV tubes trailing from his arm and a breathing tube in his nose as well. Half of his face was wrapped in clean white bandage, but it seemed that the drugs weren’t enough to fully cut out the pain. He kept shifting, trying to toss and turn, and weak noises that couldn’t even be called groans escaped his lips occasionally. Misaki was still on him, and by the glazed-over look in her eyes his drug-addled state seemed to be having some effect on her too. Shiro was sitting close by, with his head in his hands.

Nonon was much better off, but she still could only manage to get to her feet slowly and with gritted teeth. The bruising on her back from when Ranketsu pinned her and broke Saiban’s

barrier was worse than she had thought. On her bare shoulders above Saiban's sleeves her skin was a mottled mess of purples, reds, and sickly greens. The back of her legs and arms were abraded terribly too. She was so sore that once she sat down, she couldn't get back up again. So Shiro had cleaned her wounds, bandaged her arms and legs up, and given her a place to rest. Mataro jolted towards her, prepared to help her lay back down, but she shot him such a murderous glare that he backed down. To be wounded at once so minorly and so debilitatingly, in such a short combat, and on top of that having basically caused Houka to lose his eye, it all filled her with humiliated rage.

And now this.

"She's finally thinking, you get it?" Nonon said, "She fucked up so bad that she can't get away with not thinking anymore."

Ryuko was still going pretty fast when she came in for a landing. Everyone's hair and all the bedding was whipped into a momentary frenzy as a blast of wind preceded her. She tucked her feet up and touched down before them, tamping down all the radiant light and expanding peacock wings until she was just her normal self. Satsuki had come to in her arms; she was still gripping her tightly, but she seethed, "Put me down, put me down!" Ryuko released her grip and Satsuki stalked off. Neither could bear to look each other in the eye. *She'll never forgive me for this*, Ryuko thought, *and she shouldn't. Nobody should.* The image of Mako shouting "*What's wrong with you!*" was stuck in her head. *She's still there, I left her there to fight in my place!* She wanted to scream, to lash out at the closest object, but she felt the pressure of Nonon, Mataro, and Yuda's worried stares. She kept it together.

But they could tell she was barely managing that. Suppressed rage was in her eyes, cold, focused, and resentful. Her brows were furrowed, her eyelids dark circles – she couldn't stop them from twitching. And her lips were drawn into a small, bitter scowl.

"Sis!" Mataro shouted and rushed to throw his arms around her. Him too, Ryuko could barely bear to look at even as he squeezed her. *Don't you know what I just left Mako alone with! She could be dead already!* Mataro stepped back, and said, "You're really okay, right? We heard about it all from Mako!"

"Mako!" Ryuko abruptly grabbed him by the shoulders, "She's okay?"

Nonon told her everything. The more she heard, the more Ryuko's head felt like it was going to explode. "So, even Uzu, our best duelist, can't kill her. Is that what you're saying?" Ryuko growled, "And now they're teamed up, fighting together, and they still can't put her down? Is that what you're telling me!"

"I – uh, they are working on it!" Nonon protested. "They're at least buying us some time."

"Buying time. Right, great. And what happens to them when they can't buy any more time!" Ryuko railed. "What if she slips past them!" At the thought that, *She could already be flying here*, Ryuko felt the hair stand up on the back of her neck. She was alert to attack at any moment, though there was nothing coming.

Nonon made an annoyed "Humph!" at that, but only because she didn't have a better retort. Her head had been swimming, caught between her (totally justified) rage at Ryuko for her stupidity, fear over what she'd do if they couldn't fix everything, and quite honestly sympathy for her and Satsuki she wished she didn't have to feel. At least not now, it was distracting! But they were so obviously scared shitless it was mildly heartbreaking. So she hadn't been able to work out a better

plan than “see if we can beat her”, much to her frustration. *Satsuki would’ve come up with something if she were in my place*, she thought, which didn’t make it any easier on her.

But the thing that kept turning in her head was, *if only there was some way to let Ryuko fight! Some way to protect her or some time-travel trick she could use. Look at her, she wants to so badly, and if only we could it would just solve everything.* It was so ridiculously arbitrary and unfair to think that if nine months ago Satsuki could’ve had this stupid kid, none of this would have happened. And she knew that was killing Ryuko too so when Ryuko said, “Well, go ahead and say I told you so. Can’t say I didn’t earn it,” Nonon didn’t have the heart.

Satsuki had gone over to Houka’s bed and was looking down at him with gentle pity. He barely seemed to see her there, but Misaki did. When she held his hand, he managed to squeeze back. She was hardly focused on him though, and she snapped up with a look of steely resolve. “Shiro!” She barked, “Raise the barrier!”

Shiro didn’t move, but the glowing red shield dome began to rise. “There. That will give us some defense,” Satsuki said curtly, “Now, it seems that the only choice is for Ryuko to remain here for as long as required to make the situation safe.” She said it so forcefully, fixed Ryuko with such a brutal stare that it froze everyone in place.

“Yeah, okay,” Ryuko breathed. Satsuki kept staring at her – she could barely stand to even look at Ryuko. But now that she had, it was almost as if she couldn’t look away or else Ryuko would dash off to kill herself and Nozomi again. Ryuko prickled under her stare and snapped, “What? I said okay! I-I mean I’m sorry, I’m sorry! But what do you want!”

Nonon put her hand on Satsuki’s shoulder. “I agree, this is the safest place for her to be. Now, right now a big issue is they’ve basically left Rei to hold back the army on her own...” She walked around Houka’s bed to where Shiro was sitting, and Satsuki finally managed to tear her eyes off Ryuko to follow (though only with great effort and one final glance). Nonon waved to Yuda to come strategize with him.

Which just left Mataro standing there at the edge of the hospital platform with Ryuko. “Sats...” She murmured. She wanted to go after her but, *no, she doesn’t want to talk to me, she doesn’t even want to look at me.* It made her feel sick.

Mataro knew this was what Nonon had in mind, for him to console Ryuko somehow. It was clever, that was for sure. *Ahh, but what am I supposed to say?* He felt tiny next to the calamity that was engulfing Ryuko. What was going on between her and Satsuki was part of their grand struggle, like they were back at Honnouji. It was just them and the life-fibers. They even looked the part, Satsuki and her focused, domineering glare, Ryuko boiling like a volcano due to erupt. What could he add to that?

Eventually it was Wakaiketsu who spoke, *[You know, it’s times like these I’m glad I’m not a human.]* That was such an odd thing to say that it immediately got Ryuko’s attention. She continued absentmindedly, *[Because we get thrown out into the world ready for action, not all frail and helpless.]*

“Eep!” Mataro squeaked. There was no way *that* didn’t piss Ryuko off, she certainly looked like she was going to either strangle him or burst into tears. Or both.

Wakaiketsu realized immediately that she had stepped wrong and began to backpedal, *[I-I mean, I was just thinking about this clip we saw online, of like where baby crocodiles, they hatch*

*and then they go right to hunting! We kamui are kind of like that! And I just thought it's good that we can't cause you this kinda trouble!]* She explained frantically, *[N-not that I don't think you would defend me like that if you had to – or that there's anything wrong with your baby for that – or that I'm jealous, a little bit.]*

Ryuko looked at her big eyes as they flicked nervously around, and slowly said, “What are you saying?”

*[I...]*

“You know, you’re the first one who’s called what I just did ‘protecting’ anybody,” Ryuko said. “But you’ve got it all wrong. I didn’t... I didn’t mean to do that, okay? I lost it, big time,” She said. And, burying her head in her hands, she sat down on the stairs surrounding the hospital platform. “But when I didn’t run, I was trying to protect you, I was trying to protect *all* of you! None of you should have to go up against a *thing* like her.”

Mataro sat beside her, and spoke for himself and Wakaiketsu, “Well yeah, I get that.”

“No you *think* you know,” Ryuko said forcefully. “But you can’t know, not unless you –,” She waved her hands in frustration; she didn’t even know where to begin. “Ah, forget it,” She broke off her train of thought and then she said, “But you really thought that, Wakaiketsu? You really thought that I was trying to protect Nozomi somehow?”

A very loaded question, like Ryuko was about to shut down whatever she said. But Wakaiketsu answered earnestly *[Sure I do! This Minazuki lady isn't playing fair, and so you lost it, but that's your way! It's not the safest or the smartest, but that's your way too! Who doesn't know that?]*

Ryuko thought about that. Mako shouting “*What's wrong with you*” with such horrified force had shaken her deeply. And Satsuki looking so disgusted with her too. *This is just how I am, she thought, I've never been able to be better than that. I tell myself to, but when push comes to shove...* But even as she thought that, the very thought that someone knew that and brushed it off as just how she was, she began to calm down just a bit. Mataro noticed that.

“Yeah, I mean you’ve gotta admit,” He said, “Punching a chick who’s basically like a new Ragyo’s lights out while nine months pregnant is next-level crazy, even for you.” The corner of her mouth even turned up ever so slightly from that!

“You know what’s the worst part?” Ryuko asked, “Is that for a second there I really felt like I got her. For all her ranting about ‘I’m here to kill your kid’ and ‘You have no future’, she didn’t seem to even want to defend herself. ‘Course I wasn’t thinking though, she knew I’d have to hold back. Fuckin’ crazy of me, yeah that basically sums it up.”

“So, you’re mad she played you with that, too?” Ryuko didn’t answer that, “Just a bit?” She grunted, and he said, “Hey, I ain’t gonna blame you for that. I think it’s pretty rich that this chick thought she could just catch on like, basically an ‘off day’, and that would be enough to kill you. You!” He scoffed, “I mean, who the hell is she, anyway? Just another of these Couturière types who never really even had a choice?”

Ryuko wanted to rant a bit about how it didn’t really matter who she was, she was just a vessel for the true enemy who had finally come to collect. But that was too much for her now. So she said, “Nah. ‘S far as I know she used to just be some rich bitch, basically. Overthrowing

Ragyo pretty much ruined her whole life though, drove her right into their arms. She ain't really in there anymore, but she must've really wanted me dead to go this far." She chuckled morosely, "Which is really just the worst because there was literally no way we coulda stopped that. I saved her life, and she's mad at me because she lost all her money what the fuck is that?"

"Hmm," Mataro nodded. And then, without even really thinking about he said, "Is she hot though?"

Ryuko's eyebrows flew up, and she laughed, "Pfft! The fuck, seriously Mataro? What's wrong with you?"

"Hey, I'm serious!" He grinned and held up his hands defensively, "What if I have to fight her? If she's hot and I'm not prepared, you know the disadvantage that's gonna put me at? It'd be bad!" Ryuko kept laughing, so he kept it up, "Really, you know what I'm like! If she's a stunner, and I'm not prepared, I'd be stunned, literally! That'd be the end of me!"

"Ahh, alright," Ryuko said, "She's pretty good. I mean, she's got a ton of family resemblance to Satsuki, you gotta hand that to her."

"Nice."

"Hey, that's my wife you're talking about."

"But you just said -,"

"But still, she doesn't hold a candle to Sats. Too blonde-,"

"Blonde is good," Mataro commented.

"And too like, I don't know, thin? Somehow? Like a thin face," Ryuko shrugged, "So only pretty hot, I think."

"Thin is good too!"

"Ugh, well that's only because you have shitty taste," Ryuko rolled her eyes. "Literally a woman is all the boxes you need checked."

"Now don't put it like that, I'm open minded!" He protested, "That's good right?"

They might have sat there shooting the breeze until someone came to tell them Minazuki was dead or right outside the barrier, gradually putting it from Ryuko's mind. But then the others raised their voices. Nonon was shaking Shiro by the shoulders. And Ryuko jumped to her feet. She'd been listening in the whole time, but now she couldn't ignore it anymore.

"OH HELL NO!"

## Part Two of the Great Battle for the Future

October 2068

~~~~~

12:30 am

~~~~~

Satsuki was furious, like Ryuko thought, and she was terrified just like Nonon thought too. She went through the motions of talking with Nonon and Yuda, assessing each of their comrade's positions in the battle and the overall state of the military. She fit everything Nonon told her into her view of the situation, but it didn't change her final assessment and so her mind wasn't really focused on the discussion.

Not that anyone could tell, and not that she was the only one. Yuda was nodding along but just from the wideness of his eyes it was obvious he was in over his depth. Satsuki supposed (correctly) that he was reviewing everything that had happened from the moment he was first assigned to be the crew's liaison in Indonesia and thinking, *I just signed on to help free my country, how am I supposed to handle this!* And Shiro was in a world of his own. That was something Satsuki was used to, but she couldn't help but be disappointed. The only one there who was fully focused was Nonon. And she was wounded, something she had clearly neglected to mention before.

"Satsuki, I need you to focus!" Nonon snapped suddenly.

*Oh.*

"I'm sorry," Satsuki flatly, "You were saying that what we need is a contingency plan, that we should not write off the rest of the team's chances. And you're right about that. But I hope you understand that's not exactly comforting."

"Yeah no, totally," Nonon sighed, exasperated, "Leaving this to chance, you just can't do it. I mean, duh, who could! After everything we've done Ryuko – *we* – are not going out like this. That's absurd," She spat out contemptuously. Nonon was fired up, doubly so because she was sure Satsuki's genius head had the answers, if only she could wring them out. "And need I remind you; I called this shit right from the start! This is exactly what I said would happen if Ryuko wasn't able to fight, isn't it! I mean, forget blaming her it wasn't her idea, and besides you can count on her to do the stupidest thing in any situation. But you two!" She barked at Satsuki and Shiro, "You're supposed to be the smartest on the planet, but you gave them this opportunity? It's so obvious it's like they're taunting us!"

"Mmm, I was just thinking that," Satsuki murmured. Nonon blinked; she'd been hoping to get a rise out of Satsuki, not this. But it was an apt summary of Satsuki's train of thought. Ryuko was right, she was furious, and partially at Ryuko. It was one of those moments, one of many, when Ryuko went so far beyond reckless that Satsuki could barely believe there was a human mind inside her head. But getting mad at her was like getting mad at the tide for wrecking your sandcastle, it didn't do any good.

And the worst thing about it was she *wanted* to turn Ryuko loose on their enemies. Nonon was right, that was the only guaranteed win they had. But more importantly, the way she saw it, that was how things had to be. Ryuko was the only one who could go that extra mile she couldn't. She wouldn't have minded coming to in Ryuko's arms mid-flight under different circumstances. But instead Ryuko had only barely escaped, and what was worse she had missed it. When Ryuko normally saved her, she was off somewhere Satsuki couldn't follow. Space, another dimension, and she had trouble explaining what exactly happened after. Those moments were so huge and transcendent that they passed outside the scope of human language. It only made her love Ryuko more, to just accept this magic that had come into her life. Usually. But this time it had happened right before her eyes, and like a dream that cut off where the imagination failed, it cut off before the cathartic final moment. How unbearably pathetic was that?

So was Satsuki mad at Ryuko? A little, but that only went so far. What really hurt was the guilt. She looked at Ryuko, whose disheveled gown still managed to minimize the shape of her protruding belly. The sight of her made Satsuki want to cry. *She's so beautiful, but to her this is all so wrong. It should be me in her place!* Nonon was right, it shouldn't have been this way and only her and her putrid, inbred Kiryuin genes were to blame. She didn't just intellectually understand how much of a mismatch this was for Ryuko, she *felt* it deeply. *Held hostage by her own body, by her own maternal instincts. Does she really feel that way? Like our daughter is a little parasite, forcing her to love her, love her so much she gives up on her responsibility to protect the entire world?*

*No. No! What was it she said? 'It's such a normal thing', 'a totally normal part of a totally normal life'. She's trapped between the sides; her responsibility, what she is, is holding her hostage too!* Something she said to Ryuko nearly two years ago, when they were still keeping their love secret, sprung to mind. *"If there is a god, it hates us... What god would let the life-fibers get away with this except one who wants us to die?... But you fought God, and you won."* What arrogance! *I've been waiting for my punishment, for what I've done to catch up to me. Please, please don't let this be it. It can't hurt her.*

Anyone but Ryuko would have been shocked to hear Satsuki engage in such superstitious thinking. But where Houka saw an ecosystem, where Nonon saw merely a hungry monster, Satsuki saw herself as on the side of goodness and justice against pure evil. She had to; those ideas were far too neutral, too amoral. She had to believe her cause was absolute. But she felt the horrible pressure that worldview put on her now. *If it wins today, then I'm more than useless to her. I'm a liability! My bad karma is the fatal weakness in Ryuko's life!*

And that was the part she really couldn't stand.

These were the thoughts that distracted Satsuki's mind, paralyzed her. She could only see one way out of this situation, but to her horror she was scared to go through with it. Scared! She wanted to live so, so badly that she almost couldn't stand it.

"Ah, reminds me though," Nonon said, "There's something else you need to see." Bakuzan was in a narrow glass case, on a platform behind the head of Houka's bed on which scanners rested and monitored it for any molecular instability. Nonon opened the case and grabbed it now.

The moment Satsuki recognized it she gasped, as all of her thoughts were suddenly drawn down into a single, focused point.

*So this is the sign the universe has sent me.*

Nonon watched, horrified, as a darkness crossed Satsuki's face. The ghost of the old Satsuki, buried with Honnouji, resurfaced as though summoned forth by Bakuzan's talismanic power. "What is the meaning of this," she asked slowly. She already knew, but there could be no doubt.

"Uh, well, I don't really think I like get it, but..." Nonon trailed off as she nudged Shiro. Eventually he sighed and sat up.

"Ryuko's regeneration abilities work by bringing new matter in from another dimension. As you can see, it works on more than human cells. When Ranketsu attacked us, we were forced into visions, you could say, of some of these other dimensions which appear to have been influenced in some way by our subconscious minds," Shiro explained, and Satsuki's eyebrows rose as she tried to comprehend this impossible-sounding story. "I thought this was some illusion of Ranketsu's but as Houka found out he and Misaki had some degree of control there... and that place was just as real as the world we inhabit now. Only they know exactly what happened. he might have found it or Misaki's may have even created it somehow, but what we can say for sure is that when he escaped back to our reality, it came with him." Finished, Shiro slumped back down and resumed his dejected analysis of his shoes.

"You mean to tell me that it is identical, down to the last detail. That this *is* Bakuzan," Satsuki said. She held out a hand, and Nonon – though she wondered if maybe she ought not – passed Bakuzan to her.

"Guess so."

Satsuki carefully opened Bakuzan's scabbard and saw the black blade exactly as she remembered it. Her breath caught in her throat as she admired its satiny smooth surface, its sliver glinting edge. She could barely pull her eyes away. One second, she had been standing in reality and the next she was in some magical dream world. *It even feels the same too*, she thought as she clicked Bakuzan's hilt and sheath together again. Just moments ago, she had felt so helpless, so scared, but that was gone now. It seemed to her that fate itself had intervened; not to save her, not to punish her, but to show her what she needed to do. And with that, there was no reason to be afraid anymore.

"There is only one option," she said with an air of grave command. "If the others cannot kill Minazuki, then I will do so myself."

Nonon was stunned, she immediately moved to protest but for a second her mouth hung open as she searched for the words. Then she said, "Satsuki! You can't be serious about this! I-I mean, you're talking about going up against a bitch with Ragyo-level strength with, what, basically a three-star Goku Uniform? Remember when we tried that? Four against one plus yourself and she still nearly killed us all!"

"I've faced worse," Satsuki declared, stern and contemptuous, "As Aikuro said, she is 'no master duelist',"

Satsuki was confident, and Nonon could see why. It wasn't that she couldn't see the hand of destiny in it all. She knew exactly what was going on in Satsuki's mind. Take back her sword, slay this new Ragyo with it, and fix the moment it all went wrong for her. Finish the job she started so long ago on her terms. Satsuki was right, too, she might even win. Nonon wouldn't put it past her.

But the problem was what else she knew, what else Satsuki had told her. That her mission was meant to end in her death. And worse still, that this wasn't the life she would have chosen. *Oh, she looks so excited about rolling the dice one last time*, Nonon thought, *But this is the same person*



*who broke down in tears because she thought she'd make me like this. In her heart, she wants it to stop. She just wants to live to see her daughter. So why? Why is she being like this?* It was at once so pitiful and so infuriating that Nonon felt like she would explode.

“What is the *matter* with you!” She hissed. She managed to keep a lid on it because if nothing else she *really* didn’t want Ryuko involved – who knew what she’d do? She waved at Bakuzan and said, “You’re gonna kill her with that? That went so well last time! Besides, that thing isn’t a weapon right now, it’s a goddamn science project! Shiro and Izanami need to make sure it’s not, y’know, molecularly unstable or whatever. It could blow up in your hands, or – or just straight up vanish or something!”

“That will not happen. I am better than I was then, as you know.” Another infuriating thing to say. She was indeed an even more skilled fighter than she had been and Nonon could personally attest to that.

“Yeah, well last time you didn’t pass out in fear at the sight of her, did you?”

That shook Satsuki. “T-that’s not relevant,” A very not-Old Satsuki tremor in her voice, “I’m sure without Ryuko’s safety on the line, I’ll be fine.”

“You’re *really* gonna roll that dice?” Nonon said, as snidely as she could while keeping her voice down. “If it happens, you’re done.”

“It won’t.” *It can’t. I’ve mastered my fear before, I’ll do it again. If I can’t then what am I supposed to do? That’s not my fault!* The thought of it, of having her body fail her again and having to wait helplessly for Minazuki to cut her throat, that was frightening enough to shake her newfound conviction. She tried to reassert it, said what she thought she was meant to say, “I will learn to control it.” Just one look at the tight, skeptical frown on Nonon’s face told her she was not sold. “You really intend to stop me?”

Even now, Satsuki was imposing when she got serious. She glowered down at Nonon, and really might have just stormed off past her. But Nonon held her ground. She grabbed onto Bakuzan and said through gritted teeth, “Satsuki I will strap you to that bed before I let you kill yourself. I swear to God I will.”

Well, that was it. Satsuki wouldn’t – couldn’t – bring herself to actually fight Nonon. *Then we’re doomed*, she thought. Her shoulders slumped and she let out a long, labored sigh. Then she urgently pleaded, “Why don’t you see it Nonon? To have Bakuzan come back to me tonight, of all nights. How are we meant to take that, except that I’m meant to use it? Especially because it’s my fault in the first place. I let Minazuki slip away from us, I assumed she was harmless. I should have done more about REVOCS in general, should have pushed Ryuko to get involved. And... It’s my fault that I’m not... that I’m not in Ryuko’s place right now. So, what else am I supposed to do?”

“Oh please, that’s the most ridiculous thing you’ve said yet,” Nonon said. “It’s not all about you, Satsuki. I mean it!” Nonon said to cut off any further protest. “Bakuzan is here because of some crazy dimension shit Houka did. That’s his ‘personal journey’ or whatever, nothing to do with you. And Minazuki, I mean everyone thought she was harmless because she was! And when she was talking to Ryuko, did your name come up, even once? It was all some nonsense about stopping Ryuko from having a future, Aikuro told me. See? The life-fibers were always going to come at Ryuko, that’s just how it is. I get you feel shitty and all for your role in causing our little

predicament, but you aren't gonna get redemption this way. You'll just throw your life away. And frankly I thought you were over that."

"But -," Feeling *shitty*? *Is it all really so trivial to her?* That really hammered home that Nonon was never going to understand. And maybe even that she shouldn't

"A-and you know what else," Nonon carried on over her, "Look around here. You really think any of us want you to go off and kill yourself? You think you need to prove anything to us? Hell no! We all want you to live, to see your daughter born, and I know you do too! We've still got me, Shiro, Mataro and Yuda here, we can take her on! If she gets past us too somehow, then we'll talk about you getting involved." *Though if it comes to that maybe Ryuko will have to just annihilate her*, Nonon thought. *Cross that bridge when we get to it.*

"You're in no shape to fight either. And they've never fought a foe like this. You'd be going off to die just the same."

"T-that's not true!" Nonon stammered. Now it was Satsuki's turn to tilt her eyebrows skeptically. "Alright, fine, I'm a little banged up, sure. But what else do you expect us to do then?" Nonon snapped angrily. Satsuki didn't have an answer. So she rounded on Shiro instead, "And you, what's your problem? It's awful about Houka's eye, I know, but we could really use a bright idea right now."

Shiro didn't look up. "You think I'm going to outsmart the life-fibers?" He asked, "When has that ever worked?"

"What are you *talking* about," Nonon hissed.

"I can come up with strategies to defeat the humans that worship life-fibers. But Minazuki isn't that anymore. She's one with them now. And up against that, when has any plan worked out? All that matters now is throwing our best fighters at them. Only power and courage work now. I can make tools to help them, but that's kind of the limit." Now he looked up. He seemed drained, totally exhausted, and his eyes were dull and far-away. "They showed us that today," He said, just above a whisper, "We thought we could outwit Ranketsu, but we played right into its hands. You can't fathom it! They are so much bigger, so much older, our minds are just... playthings to them."

"You too, huh?" Nonon groaned. She turned fully to face him and grabbed him by the shoulders. "What is the matter with you people today!" She yelled as she shook him, "We don't have time for you to have a whole crisis too. Saiban went through the same shit, you're not gonna impress me. So pull your head out of your ass and give us something. Make an invention then, if that's all your good for!"

Shiro met her eyes angrily and put a hand on hers to yank it off. But when he saw Satsuki – this was the first time in the whole exchange that he'd really looked at her – his heart broke a bit. She was lost and afraid, and he saw her in a different light. No battlefield general, no great hero. Right now, she was just a concerned mother. That wouldn't stand.

Nonon stopped shaking him, and he said, "Satsuki, this is not your fault. It's mine. I... should never have coerced you and Ryuko into having Nozomi for the sake of my project. I," he cleared his throat, it was hard to get the words out, "I'm sorry. I wanted – no, I still want – to make that future real. But I got impatient, I wasn't thinking about what was smart or safe or... what you

wanted. I don't know if I can make it right but," He looked at Nonon, "It's my responsibility to do that, not yours."

Satsuki was shocked. In a stroke, a massive weight of guilt lifted from her. Shiro continued, "There is one thing, though it's a bad idea."

"What's so bad about it?" Nonon asked.

"Only that it's what I *want* to do, which means it must be playing into their hands somehow," He said.

Nonon rolled her eyes, "Oh, *come on*. Spit it out already!"

With a sigh, Shiro did so, "I could let Ryuko fight again, by delivering Nozomi now. We could perform a C-section and then hybridize her immediately. We made a surgical protocol for it already, in case there were any birth complications. It's not instant, we will still have to buy time. If the others can fight through the night, we'll make it. But after that we can turn Ryuko loose and as we've seen she *will* kill Minazuki."

Satsuki and Nonon both blinked in surprise. But once they understood what Shiro was suggesting their moods turned around completely. "Of course!" Satsuki gasped, her heart leaping.

"Holy shit, that's perfect!" Nonon laughed, "It's so fucking simple it sounds like it'd actually work!" Now she wasn't shaking him angrily but clapping him on the shoulder.

But that was when Ryuko whirled around and shouted, "OH HELL NO!"

She leapt up and stormed over to them.

"Ryuko -," Satsuki tried to plead with her, but Ryuko wasn't going to let her get a word in.

"What! What could you have to say besides just 'do what we say'?" Reacting to their stunned silence she carried on, "Oh, what? I don't get a say, huh? You – you can't do this! No!"

"Oh, calm down Ryuko!" Nonon rolled her eyes, "Of course you get a say. But what else can we do? If you say no then we *have* to kill Minazuki and you know-,"

"Yeah. I know. But what the fu- I mean I can't just-," Ryuko stammered. Nonon had a point, and it was terrifying to admit that. She had a good sense of the power packed inside of Minazuki and knew that if any of them got on the wrong end of it they could easily be killed. The thought of that alone was enough to tempt her, to make her want to shout, "*Get it over with already*". But no, instead she rounded on Shiro and said, "This is some *insane* bullshit, you know that right? You're all 'oh I'm sorry 'bout the whole have a baby for my science project thing', then you turn right around and drop *this*! Do you even hear yourself?"

"Did I not say it was a bad idea?" He responded. "Your reaction is not unexpected. Or unjustified."

"Yeah I bet it's 'not unexpected'," Ryuko growled, "Because you know as well as I do that I can't be knocked out for this, the drugs won't work. I'll have to be conscious!"

That had occurred to Satsuki, and she had hoped Ryuko would be willing to soldier on regardless. It was news to Nonon though and she gasped, "Fuckin what?"

Shiro nodded, "That's true. You're only able to hold your healing abilities in check while you are conscious. The moment you go under, your healing will remove the anesthetic from your system and then you'd quickly wake up. Although... perhaps by administering some of the life-fiber suppressant serum..." Ryuko shuddered and looked totally horrified. "Or not."

"No. Never again."

"Fine, fine, just an idea," Shiro held his hands up. "Then yes, you'd have to stay conscious. Especially because we may need you to... well, control your own healing so that the incision doesn't seal up. You see I developed a kind of brace, a band of titanium wrapped in rubber, adjustable diameter. It can be placed in the incision to block it – in theory."

"Ough," Ryuko cringed at the idea, "What the fuck!"

"Now now, this one I developed years ago for general use, in case we ever had to do extended surgery on you. But we've never needed it until now. So it might not work without your help."

Ryuko didn't like the sound of that at all. Everyone else knew it too, she wasn't blind to how Nonon was slowly rubbing her face and Satsuki's back was straight and stiff as if bracing for a blow. "I can't do that! You think it's easy to control my healing powers? Make it go faster, okay, but make it go slower? I-I dunno if I ever even tried!"

"Is it impossible, though?" Nonon asked.

"I don't know! No, I guess, but you expect me to do it while you strap me to an operating table and rip -," Another compulsive shudder shook her body. "No. No I just can't do it! It doesn't matter how necessary you say it is, it's impossible. You'll kill her!"

"No, we won't kill her," Shiro sighed, "This procedure saves the lives of premature infants. Nozomi is very healthy, a few days before due will be quite fine especially once she is hybridized. She'll be fine."

"Your stupid metal ring thing will close up and crush her!" Ryuko yelled over him.

"It won't!" Shiro shot back. "I never said there wasn't a risk. But it's that you're stuck here until it's done and can't run again if Minazuki gets through. But if all you're worried about is if Nozomi will be safe, that's not a risk at all! Look, look at him," he waved at Houka. "Under an hour to save his life *and* his face! Izanami has the most advanced surgical technology that's ever existed! She. Will. Be. Fine."

Ryuko scoffed, "Yeah. You'd never risk such a valuable scientific investment, huh?" And she stormed off back towards Mataro.

"Ryuko, wait!" Nonon was right after her, and Satsuki too. "Ryuko, *please*," Nonon said, "Can't you at least consider it?" Ryuko didn't say anything. "You said it's not impossible, so that means you can do it!" For once, she didn't bark it out like an order. She had a kind of breathless fervor about her. "I know it'll be hard, but childbirth always is!"

Ryuko was not persuaded by her sudden change of tone. "Fuck off," She growled, "You've got no idea what it's like."

“No I – Okay fine, maybe I don’t. But after everything you’ve done, you’re telling me *this* is the thing that’s too far for you? I don’t buy it!”

“I’ll be here with you,” Satsuki said. She took Ryuko’s hand, pulled it gently so she faced her, “You won’t have to go through it alone. Nonon is right, you *can* do this.”

Ryuko didn’t know how to respond to that. Her first instinct was to keep right on yelling, that only made her angrier. But there was more to it, cutting right to the core of what was so terribly wrong with it all. *The most important moment in our lives*, she thought, and *it’s all been hollowed out to make way for cold, hard necessity*.

“Well?” Satsuki asked, still flinty.

When Ryuko found the words, she bit back her tears and said, “You said it wrong. Don’t you hear yourself?”

“What do you mean?”

Ryuko took Satsuki’s other hand and pulled them both close. She said, “ ‘Course I want you here. I can’t do this without you! But I need *you* here, not you acting like your old self just because you think – ah hell, I mean, just because we have a fight to win! Don’t you see how wrong that is? You’re the one who from the start wanted this to be somethin’ special. For *us*. For you, and me, and for her. If we miss that, we miss it *forever*! And it’s gonna hang over her too. She’s already gonna have to deal with not being human, nothin’ in her life’s ever gonna be normal so I – I wanted to at least make sure she starts out right.”

“Oh, *Ryuko*.”

“I wanted, y’know, the hospital bed, and the nurse, and all our family there after. How it’s meant to be done. Not like this, with all the machines, and the blood... What kind of message does that send? That’s she’s just another test subject, another weapon! And she’ll have to live with that over her head forever. For all of eternity knowing this is why her life started. I don’t want that for her, and neither should you! And you should’ve thought of this too!” She shouted at Shiro, “This’s supposed to be the biggest fuckin’ deal to you, right? Human immortality! And you’re acting like it’s just a trip to the dentist!” Shiro didn’t have anything at all to say to that.

But hearing Ryuko pour her heart out had melted Satsuki’s icy composure. She smiled softly and looked at Ryuko with utter tenderness. Ryuko sniffed and said, “I’m sorry. After what I just put you through, I know I should just... toughen up and do this for you. But I can’t. I need you here.”

“You’re right,” Satsuki put her hands on Ryuko’s cheeks and turned her face, so she could no longer stare at the ground in shame. “You’re so right, I just didn’t want to see it. We should be feeling joy right now, shouldn’t we?”

“Mhm,” Ryuko nodded. “You’re... not angry?”

“No. I’m here now.”

“*Satsuki!*” Ryuko pulled her close and buried her face in Satsuki’s shoulder. With Satsuki here to support her it didn’t sound impossible, just terrifying. She couldn’t keep herself from crying, accepting that this was really happening triggered such an overwhelming keening feeling in

her chest. Was this the joy that Satsuki wanted to feel? It felt more like the nervous anticipation before a battle. But it was so strange and unfamiliar that she couldn't even place it, all she knew was what it meant. She was about to cross a line, and after that things would never be the same again. "I ain't ready!" She sniffed, glad that she had Satsuki to hide her face from the others.

"It's okay," Satsuki said gently, "It'll be alright." She was overcome by the same nervous anticipation that Ryuko was. After a moment, she said, "I... feel as if I may cry as well." She looked over at the others for guidance.

They looked confused, but then Nonon said, "Then do it. It's cool, we all get it." And Satsuki with wet eyes pulled Ryuko even closer, if that were possible. For a moment they did nothing but hold each other, crying quietly at first but when that ran out the only noises they made were a few undignified sniffles.

Meanwhile, Mataro had crept over to where the others were beside Houka's bed. "So, this means she'll do it, right?" He whispered. Nonon and Shiro shared a look and nodded. "Unreal! It is messed up though. Mako, my folks, Soroi, they'd kill to be here."

"You've got a point," Nonon agreed, "I never pictured this'd go down without Mako here."

"I never thought I'd see this much," Shiro said. To see Satsuki crying, overcome by emotion, was very strange to him.

"I gotta believe this is healthy for them," Nonon said.

"Shoot, you're one to talk," Yuda added, the first time he'd found the courage to insert himself into the momentous events he watched in front of him. "I still can't even believe I'm here for this at all."

"Should I try and call Mako?" Mataro asked, "Get her over here?"

"Mmm, I wanna say yes, it would be nice for her," Nonon said, "But you know she'd come right away, and with Minazuki on the board that might put her in serious danger."

"Okay," Mataro said slowly. The others hadn't really noticed, but Nonon was acting oddly calm all of a sudden. Mataro saw it but he couldn't guess why.

It was because of something Saiban had said to her, right when Ryuko had stormed off. *[Guess we know for sure Rosuketsu was lying to us now. If she really was another kind of alien monster with her own scheme, she would never even try and turn this down. She's not thinking about it as more power or anything like that at all.]* Nonon hadn't even been thinking about that, but when she realized he was right it changed things for her completely. It meant that humanity becoming one with the life-fibers was the future, was what had to happen, and that was exactly why Minazuki was here to stop it. And as much as she hated to admit it, she felt for Ryuko, having to carry that burden on her own. "The thing that's really crazy about this," She said to nobody in particular, "Is that if this all goes right, in a couple of hours she won't be one-of-a-kind anymore." Then, to Shiro, she barked, "You'd better not fuck this up."

"I would *never*."

After a moment more, Ryuko finally managed to disconnect from Satsuki. “When this is over,” she said, “You’ll wait for me, won’t you?”

“I won’t let anyone else so much as touch her.”

Ryuko laughed softly, “Perfect.” Then she turned to others, dried her eyes, and said, “Okay. Looks like you get your wish.”

# Part Three of the Great Battle for the Future

## Chapter Summary

The Ira fight.

## Chapter Notes

The T key on my keyboard isn't working well so if you see any words that are missing the T that's why

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

October 2068

~~~~~

12:50 am

~~~~~

Nearly an hour had passed since Minazuki first arrived and the battle had progressed to a new and still more devastating stage. The remains of the Japanese military were out of sight, the REVOCS armada surged forth with renewed zeal – only Rei was still fighting to prevent their landing. None of that mattered now. Thousands of tons of steel, uncounted human lives and shed life-fibers, it was all irrelevant compared to fight taking place in a sky now devoid of aircraft.

Across miles of open air, trails of light and smoke flashed this way and that. Glittering rainbows, vibrant purples and greens, comets of blazing fire. There was Minazuki, with Aikuro, Uzu, and Tsumugu hot on her heels. They crashed together, so often there seemed to be dozens fighting. If one watched long enough, you would begin to see the pattern. Minazuki was pinned, harried and blocked at every turn; no amount of zigzagging could carry her far before one or more of them caught up to her.

Clashes were too fast and violent for ordinary people to see. They began with huge shockwaves that pulverized the rubble of the half-flooding, half-burning town below and ended seconds later as the trails of light whizzed straight away. Sometimes they were clearly knocked back by one final overpowering kick or swing and hurtled straight away in a violently straight line. They might hit the ground and kick up a fountain of earth, or the water which steamed in its haste to get out of their way, or they might be flung far out into the air. But every time they rebounded, freezing momentarily and twisting their body around with gritted teeth before blasting off into the thunder again. Wherever they ended up, each turn obliterated everything around them.



Ira's huge body was the center of it. Mako flashed around his head and with his battleship-sized sword and open hand he was a monstrous wall that kept Minazuki from pushing through and going after Ryuko as she would have liked. Like a man trying to catch a fly, he weaved around and leaned back and forth to keep her in sight. Unlike an ordinary man though, he had three other flies and an on-demand lightning storm to keep the fly in his sights. Wherever Minazuki dashed, his huge face with its blazing eyes was scowling at her.

When the others split off from Minazuki, that was Tonbo's cue to rivet her with a bolt of lightning. He and Mako were especially focused right now and instinctively set up combo attacks, thinking about Ryuko in danger had that effect on Mako. That was enough to pulverize Minazuki, but only for an instant before her charred corpse sprung back to life. But in that instant, from up above Ira's open palm or a savage cleaving strike from his sword crashed down on her. And even if she managed to get out of the way, the blast of pressurized air as he struck at superhuman speed would have shattered every bone in a human observer's body. Again and again, he struck her to earth with this unstoppable force and left gashes and handprints that would scar the land for generations after. But it wasn't enough, each time Minazuki sprung back together.

This was the great battle of the kamui. The one they had been training for. Not even Krakatoa had been so exquisitely destructive.

But though Minazuki took hit after hit, it was her opponents that skated on the edge of disaster. Sure, they could slice her in half, even cut her head off, or blast her with the searing force of lightning or shredding blasts from Tsumugu's shrapnel cannons. But all that yielded was a momentary splash of blood before she pieced herself back together again. She even seemed to be healing faster the longer they fought. So, was it even worth it? To be blinded by her blood as she carried right on stabbing back with perfect precision? Even getting close was dangerous, because her fingers would stretch out, and given just a moment's chance they would wrap around an arm or a leg and snag them. Reeled in like a fish, they had to slice the fingers off before they were impaled.

Only raw skill kept them alive. Uzu with Shingantsu, Tsumugu with bristling guns, Aikuro with Nektsu's agile flight pattern, they each had their ways of escaping danger. And years of practice gave them all a sixth sense of where their death came from. For Uzu it went so far that he was frustrated – far from being exhausted after hours of combat he was spitting with fury. It wasn't just that he wanted the glory of the kill for himself – and he did - but he could never look Ryuko and Satsuki in the eye if he failed them! For him the whirlwind of combat was as natural, as factual as the breeze, no matter how close to death he appeared he was the one who forced Minazuki back time and again. He even got a bit reckless, goading her to swing her one-handed scissor blade shut on him like a claw only to block it, just to give the others their chance to land a finishing blow. But it was never enough.

It was after one attempt at that move that Minazuki realized their weak link, the one who didn't have that raw skill: Mako. Uzu lunged right in Minazuki's face, wings buffeting her fingers away with a blast of air. He made to slice her throat, swords crossed in front of him, and on came the scissor closing in on either side of him in an instant. But he was ready, blocking with his arms still crossed, trembling with the effort as an earth-shattering strength tried to crush him like a crab with a clam. Tsumugu and Aikuro both zoomed in behind her with blades to her throat.

But right before blood was drawn there was another massive clap of pressurized air and Minazuki was an afterimage, and it was Tsumugu who had someone behind him and a sword to his neck. Reiketsu was watching his back, however, and a mess of gun barrels of various sized that stuck out

from his wings trained on Minazuki and turned her upper body into red chunks. That gave him enough time to zoom off, and then for good measure Mako shot her with a bolt of lightning.

“Oh!” Mako gasped – she got a glimpse of the insides of Minazuki as she pieced herself back together. Her flesh was blackened and blistered, bubbling as it slid over the stark white of bone. Empty eye sockets held pinpricks of light. It gave her chills, but not nearly as badly as when those pinprick eyes which seemed to boil as the whites reformed turned right towards her. And then suddenly they were in her face.

“AIEEEE!” She shrieked. Raw survival instinct saved her from the first blow, she managed to raise her bat just in time to knock it away. But the force, the raw strength within Minazuki was like nothing Mako had ever felt, it made her arms vibrate like jelly. She was immediately aware of the murderous intent coming at her, but unlike before with the REVOCS Admirals when Minazuki drew her sword back and thrust it again it didn’t move in slow-motion but real-time. Mako panicked. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t breathe! She didn’t know what to do.

Uzu was there to save her though, diving between them and effortlessly parrying Minazuki’s thrust. He slid up past her and plunged both swords deep into her, carving her into pieces which he kicked away. “She’s going after Mako!” He shouted.

Ira had already seen. His eyes flashed as he looked up at them. They were floating directly above his head, and Minazuki was piecing herself back together a few hundred yards ahead in front of him. Ira’s brows furrowed, and he dropped his sword.

“**STAND BACK!**” Ira roared. He leaned back, raised his hands, and clapped them together on Minazuki.

**\*BOOM!\***

The most powerful shockwave the battle had yet produced flattened everything for a mile around. Trees were uprooted, even the topsoil was ripped from the ground. Waves of dust and rubble washed out and suffused everything. And there was Ira, palms pressed together, with Minazuki trapped between. The others stopped, astonished by the raw destructive power. Surely that had been enough to – if not kill Minazuki – at least trap her as a paste on his hands.

But Ira flinched, and the others gasped in shock when they saw that his hands weren’t completely closed. There was Minazuki, not crushed at all but with holding Ira back with both her hands. She was holding onto her sword with only one stretched finger that wrapped around the hilt, but she didn’t need it, the other nine were more than enough to match even his mightiest blow.

“What?” Uzu couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“No way!” Neither could Mako. Minazuki’s elbows were bent, but with a tremendous force that made the liquid stone of Ira’s hands groan she began to straighten them. At least there was finally an annoyed wrinkle to her brow. Ira’s, on the other hand, was already furrowed to the max. He squeezed back on Minazuki with all his might, shouting as he did. His wide-open eyes and mouth glowed with fiery rage.

“**UURRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAGH!**” His voice echoes all around, hunching his shoulders as he put his entire skyscraper-height body into crushing Minazuki. **\*BOOM!\*** **\*BOOOM!\*** **\*BOOOOM!\*** A series of progressively louder and more powerful blasts of force resonated from him. He spread his legs wide, digging his feet in and cracking the ground. He held his hands in

front of him as though praying, and as the titanic force of his grip grew the molten light of his eyes and mouth grew brighter and brighter.

**“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”** There was a flash from the top of Ira’s head, and a loud noise like a chime, and his hair burst into flame. It was already a lustrous and shiny gold, but now it had gained a glow of its own, a forest of raw orange life-fibers that sizzled the air with heat and waved furiously. Sparkling particles of plasma rose from it and so his head truly was topped by a raging inferno. The power was palpable around him. And still Minazuki did not yield.

For more than a minute, they were frozen there as Ira tried with every ounce of his being to defeat Minazuki’s power. But they were evenly matched, and although the others wheeled around attempting to find an angle of attack there was no way they could squeeze into the few feet of open space between his hands. Ira knew that if he lost this contest, and burned all his energy doing it, he’d be vulnerable. So, at last he yelled, **“AAAAAAGH!”** and hurled Minazuki as far as he could back out to sea. Her rainbow glow sailed through the air as he caught his breath.

“Holy...” Aikuro began.

“... Shit. If that couldn’t stop her...” Tsumugu finished.

**“I’m... sorry,”** Ira panted, **“I felt that she would win out, eventually. We’ll have to –,”** He cut off as he watched Minazuki freeze in the air and then suddenly dash off to the east, on a broad arc to veer around them. **“Oh come on!”** His sword’s tip had sunken into the ground leaving it nearly upright, and he seized it and sprinted to intercept, with the others flying right beside.

Minazuki came ashore over a forest. In the distance she was just barely visible, streaking through the dark silhouettes of pines that waved in the gale force winds and – as Ira grew close – shook rhythmically as his footfalls caused tremors. Tsumugu caught up to her first. He had incorporated parts from a squadron of experimental stealth bombers into his *One Man Army* form and their sleek black wings and engines propelled him to speeds outpaced only by Ryuko. The wings erupted from invisible ports along his back while he flew along, and from ports on his arms a battery of railguns emerged, dwarfing his body. One after another they spewed out hard steel; cold, magnetically powered. Supersonic sabots whizzed through the air, not nearly fast enough to actually hit Minazuki but each shot was aimed with purpose. He knew exactly where she had to be to avoid getting hit, and he himself was there, cutting her body apart with the wide blade of his sword and blocking retaliatory blows with the flat, shiny smooth surface of his shield.

Suddenly uprooted trees and a fifty-foot-high wave of earth roared past them as Ira arrived. Skidding to a halt from a full-tilt sprint he swung his sword with superhuman accuracy and cleave Minazuki in half. He was done holding back. The unearthly precision he wielded when he shut one eye and his vision focused in on his target, the nauseating speed with which his sword moved meant nothing to him. He was completely at one with Tekketsu, and the more fired up they got the more light and limber he felt.

Minazuki pieced herself back together again and whirled into action. Mako was still next to Ira’s head – the safest place to be – and Minazuki charged right at her, ignoring the others and soldiering through several lightning blasts that scorched her body. But Ira leaned back and threw his sword up, and though she was but a tiny speck to him managed to block her, edge to edge. The collision made a noise like a huge gong.

The others were on her tail hard now. Three against one, Minazuki was constantly on the verge of killing one or another of them. With *Kyojin* form pushed into overdrive, however, there were no

openings in their defense. Especially not when every time Ira hit her, parry though she might, the momentum was so powerful it sent her hurtling out to sea or crashing into the ground. She tried to hide in the forest, zipping between the creaking trunks of the few trees left standing, but Tsumugu disgorged hundreds of napalm charges that set the forest ablaze even in the torrential rain. Then, carving a hole in the flame, Uzu dove down onto her and drove a katana through her head from the top, then yanked back to hurl her into the air where Ira was waiting with a two-handed blow that sent her body spinning, glistening guts stretched out to their full extent as her legs and torso were ripped apart.

But if even that was not enough to kill her – and it was not – then there was one thing she could still do: run. And that was what really mattered, because every time they fought and separated, it was a chance for her to cover more ground, to plow further inland. Minazuki's defense was weak compared to theirs, but that almost worked to her advantage. She had lots of openings, angles where a sword could slip past hers and carve into her body easily. When it did, it was up to her which of her various pieces served as the base for her regeneration. If they weren't careful, the cloud of glistening red chunks would hurtle off, pulled towards a separated hand or foot that had been accidentally launched inland.

There wasn't much to do but chase after her, with a growing sense of dread that if they couldn't manage to land a successful cross-cut, she would eventually get to Ryuko. They managed to cross-cut some tiny bits a few times when they had her cut open – a stray life-fiber, an odd fleshy tendon or two, but those must have been such small parts of her body they didn't even matter. To get her head or a limb was another matter entirely.

They were getting tired, too. It was a gradual but inevitable process and if it went too far, one sloppy move might lead to death. Aikuro nearly lost his head when he realized just a second too late that he'd used the same opening three times in a row, and she'd finally caught on. Give her an obvious target with an overhead from one knife, and then slide in to put the other in her belly down to the hilt. Well this time she didn't take the bait and her scissor snipped in on his neck. He only barely blocked and then scooted back, and now he was the one blocking her advance. "Rggh!" he grunted as Uzu swooped in to help, and Nekketsu said, *[What kinda peeves me is Mother was never in any real danger from their kamui, was she? If she's this slippery and Ryuko's even tougher, then what could they have done!]*

*[Yeah, well I doubt even Ryuko'd be so chill with getting' her body chopped up like this!]* Seijitsu replied breathlessly. They needed almost as much concentration as their wearers but she managed, *[It's like she wants us to do it!]*

*[Shingantsu doesn't have a trick for this, huh?]*

*[What do you think!]* Seijitsu snapped back.

Just then Tsumugu strafed by, with the barrels of a pair of miniguns mounted below his arms pointed at them. "Stay focused!" He barked, and then opened fire on all of them. \*VRRRRRT!\* Bullets pattered harmlessly off the kamui, but they turned Minazuki quite porous. A fountain of blood obscured their sight, but they each knew what they had to do. Most of those holes sealed up quickly but Tsumugu had done what he meant to and severed Minazuki's wrist almost completely. He banked around, tucked up his wings to avoid hitting the others, then dove past and sliced it completely off. "GO FOR HER SWORD!" He shouted, and they were already moving.

As one Aikuro and Uzu zoomed towards the ground, while Tsumugu kept the rest of Minazuki's body from interfering. He chased her around as she nimbly darted through the air, sometimes right behind him other times hundreds of yards away. But she still managed to send out her fingers to chase the sword, and somehow – to their total astonishment – Aikuro and Uzu were outpaced. The blackened ground was rushing up, all twisted treestumps and mud, and Aikuro nearly had a hand on the pearly silver handle when out of nowhere the fingers zipped in from the side and snatched it right from under him. He gasped as he watched it zoom away into the distance - the speed with which Minazuki could retract her fingers was simply preposterous. He and Uzu raced to catch up but they were left in the dust.

“Tsumugu! Cut it!” Aikuro shouted. With a look of grim satisfaction, Tsumugu took this opportunity. He brought his shield up underneath the fingers and they bent around it like tensile wires, bleeding a little as they were nicked by the bladed edge. He raised his sword towards his chin, and then slid it out right along the edge of his shield as though it were a whetstone. This was how he achieved the cross-cut, and with all five fingers right there he was sure he would not only cut them, but permanently deprive Minazuki of her sword. He had her.

But then Minazuki's fingers bent. One moment they were wires, taught and inflexible and the next, rubber bands. They slid around the edge of his shield and right off it, leaving him to grimace and think, *No way!* Then she kicked him, hard, with both feet right into his gut and sent him spinning away.

“No, no no NO!” Uzu shouted, “She's getting away!” Minazuki quickly recovered her sword and without a backwards look zoomed off inland. She didn't get far before the ground shook, and a shadow fell over the battle.

Everyone looked up. Somehow, against all laws of physics or even plausibility, Ira had managed to vault with his sword and force his huge *Kyojin* form into a pounce. He only flew up to about 500 feet – about the width of his shoulders - but that was enough to clear the gap and pass right over the rest of them. And with his huge body slamming into the ground, arms stretched out before him, he couldn't miss. Pushing his body to the limit had made not only his hair catch fire – now every seam in his stone flesh was aglow. Cords of muscle highlighted in orange that seeped out from within.

“YAAAAAAAAAH!” He fell for what seemed like a sickening time. Everyone braced for the impact. Minazuki nearly managed to slip away, but Ira's hand plunged down on top of her. It touched down first, unleashing a towering wave of black earth more that swept over the forest more as a liquid than as dirt and rock. But that was only a preview of the impact that Ira made as he landed. He tucked his other arm into a roll and landed on its curve. It seemed like his feet just missed them, but in fact it was quite a ways away. *\*BOOM! BOOM! BOOOOSSSSSSSHHHH!\** The impact made the ground vibrate like a cymbal. No mere tremor, it was a shock that was detected by seismometers around the country. He skid along, kicking up the ground in a wave two hundred feet tall at least. Aikuro, Uzu, and Tsumugu watched it approach, and when they realized they were low enough to be hit they floated up the end of his sword's hit, which was sticking up nearly vertically. This was where Mako was hovering.

The wave of earth rolled by beneath them, and when it subsided and the terrible grinding noise had died down they were left looking out over a devastated landscape. “Whoa,” Uzu said simply, and then to Mako, “Did you know he was gonna – ,”

“- Nuh-uh!” Mako shook her head vigorously. She had an intense look in her eyes. “He just saw she was getting away and then -,” she made a wide arcing motion with the tip of her bat.

*[Now that must have done something!]* Reiketsu said, *[I doubt even one of us would survive that!]*

Ira actually managed a fairly nimble roll – though it moved in tectonic slow motion. He’d landed about half a mile ahead of them and since he was about half that height, he still seemed quite close. He rose to a crouch and spun as he did it, lifting his hand from the ground. To everyone’s dismay, the moment he did they could see a red mebrane lifting from his hand and from the ground. Glistening with internal light it peeled away in long, dangling threads that coalesced before him in a point. Minazuki was reforming yet again.

“Ugh!” Mako winced.

“My god...” Tsumugu was speechless. She could reform even from complete pulverization. *Good to know*, he thought. As worried as he was the analytical part of Tsumugu’s brain was working overtime too.

**“I WON’T LET YOU GET AWAY!”** He bellowed, **“YOUR FIGHT ENDS HERE!”** And he reared back and threw a huge punch. By the time it hit, Minazuki had already reformed and, though she stared down the barrel of knuckles the width of a football field, she held her ground and thrust with her sword. The two collided with a flash and another shockwave, and then it was Ira’s fist that gave way.

The others all gasped, as the stone flesh of Ira’s hand split open. “IRA NO!” Mako buried her eyes in her hands.

“SHIT!” Uzu and Aikuro immediately fired up their wings and engines and zoomed off to support.

But Tsumugu held his position. “WAIT!” He saw that when Ira’s hand broke open, it also began to change.

The core of Ira’s hand, down by his wrist, was molten. And the interior was not broken and craggy but smooth and rounded like a bowl. His fingers deformed, wadding down into more bright orange liquid rock. Sulfurous fumes rose from it, along with a trail of glowing droplets. His whole hand was quickly remade into a wide cup, and as he followed through with his punch it closed around Minazuki. Sword or no, she was still caught by it and pressed into the flowing rock, and by the time she got free it was too late. It was closing up from a bowl to a sphere, with her inside.

“Oh... oh...” Now everyone else had figured out what was happening and they watch, trying not to get their hopes up. But when the sphere was complete, Minazuki was no longer visible. Ira had trapped her. “YEAAAAAH!” Mako cheered, and the others breathed huge sighs of relief and laughed as they flew over to where Ira was standing up.

At first, signs of Minazuki’s struggle within were visible. Like rubber, the molten rock of Ira’s sphere-hand was stretched as she bounced off it in various directions. But it would not give, and as the others arrived to hover around his head they watched the surface cool. It hissed and fizzed as it turned flinty grey once again, and then to top things off it pressed down in places until it had recreated the shape of his closed fist. Only now the seams between his fingers and his palm

were closed up completely. Inside, a relatively small spherical hollow remained with only Minazuki's cold rainbow light to illuminate it.

"Holy shit man, you did it! Ha ha HA!" Uzu shouted, beaming, "Gimme five!" Ira, grinning, lifted his other hand and smacked it into Uzu's. And not gently either, it made a cracking *\*Wha-bam!\** noise and kicked up another shockwave, on top of sending an electric jolt down his arm.

"This is honestly genius, Ira," Aikuro said, "How'd you figure out you could do this?"

**"Ah, well, I can't take all the credit,"** As much as he tried to be modest, Ira's voice still boomed, **"Tekketsu is in here too, and I can't say which of us had the idea first. But we noticed how as we pushed this form further it got hotter and hotter. And when I saw how *she* was able to stretch and bend her body, I thought 'well, it's not like this is my real body', and it... just kind of clicked!"**

"And dude, when you lunged at her, that was just un-be-leivable!" Uzu, elated with their success, was riding high and it showed. "How did that feel?"

**"Ha! I couldn't believe it myself!"** Ira said, **"I could really *feel* gravity pulling down on me. I don't usually feel so heavy in *kyojin* form, but when I jumped I was never sure it was going to work,"** Ira turned to Mako. He could feel her eyes on him, and she with her cheeks obstinately puffed up clearly wanted him to look at her too. **"You did great, Mako,"** He said with a smile, **"And you too Tonbo. I'm sorry you had to go through that, but you handled it well."**

Mako took that as the opportunity to burst out with, "You were SO. COOL!" She rushed over to his huge cheek and hugged it, arms wide and face pressed right up to it. "I love you! I love you! I love you! I love you!"

**"Aw, that's – heh,"** Ira chuckled, **"That's all I need to hear."**

"So what're gonna do with her now?" Mako asked. She still had that intense look in her eyes, which brought Ira back down. *Right, we still have Ryuko's safety to deal with.*

**"It's no problem,"** Ira said, **"I'll just stay in this form until Ryuko has Nozomi, and we can let her deal with it."**

He was the only one who was confident of that though. "No dude," Uzu said, "How long is it til her due date? It's like, at least a week, right?"

"Ten days," Tsumugu said, "And she's been keeping meticulous track, for what it's worth."

"Yeah, exactly. You can't make it that long without food or water."

**"I can if I have to,"** Ira replied. He scowled seriously at that; of course it would be hard, but he had his commitment to make it happen. **"Especially in this form."**

"Why's the form matter? No, seriously, what do we really know about it?" Uzu looked to Aikuro and Tsumugu, "I mean his real body is in there somewhere, right? Maybe you won't need food, maybe not. What I say we do is we make some kind of a cage for her. Life-fiber barrier or something. Getting her in would be a little dicey, but I bet you guys can come up with something

for that. And then we can either wait for Ryuko or take our time figuring out how to beat her!” It was obvious that Uzu favored that latter.

“That’s a start,” Aikuro said with a hand on his chin, “And for now we should probably get her as far away as possible, too. What do you think?” He asked Tsumugu.

“I’ve got two things,” Tsumugu answered, “One, we need to call Nonon back at base, let them know we’ve resolved things or – at least – bought them a lot of time.”

“Oh yeah, right. I’ll do it,” Uzu nodded.

“Two, the three of us need to double back and relieve Rei, right away.”

Before they did that, however, Uzu pressed a finger to his earpiece and said, “Nonon? It’s me.”

~ “*Oh Uzu, thank goodness!*” ~ Nonon answered immediately. ~ “*Everything alright?*” ~

“Yeah, actually it’s great!” He smiled as he said it, “We kinda made a huge breakthrough here.”

~ “*Seriously? Oh, that’s just – I mean man,*” ~ They could all hear Nonon laugh (Ira leaned in close to listen in to Mako’s earpiece with his huge stone ear), ~ “*Not what I was expecting at all! We’ve got a pretty big breakthrough of our own over here, too. But do yours first, do yours. Did you kill her? I feel like I would’ve felt that.*” ~

“Kill her? Well, no. But we did trap her! Ira did, actually. He’s got her caught inside the fist of his *Kyojin* form, you should’ve seen it. He like melted it and reformed it around her, she’s like a bee in a bottle! We just need to figure out what to do with her is all,” Uzu explained eagerly.

~ “*You’re kidding! That’s like, perfect! If you can just keep her there for a couple hours, we can send Ryuko right over and get this done with!*” ~

Uzu frowned, “A couple hours? Ryuko? What’s that supposed to mean?”

~ “*Well, that’s our breakthrough!*” ~ Nonon said cheerfully, ~ “*Ryuko’s having a c-section! She’s going to have Nozomi like, right now, and then hybridize her, and then come kill Minazuki!*” ~

A hush fell over the assembled kamui wearers. It took a moment before they had the wherewithal to speak again.

“... Holy shit,” Aikuro said. He was thinking of the first time he saw Ryuko, stalking into Honnouji and confronting Satsuki. Hard to imagine that even then she had inside her the power that – well, how could they deny it anymore – was going to completely transform humanity.

“Ohmygosh, *Ryuko!*” Mako clapped a hand over her mouth. She was mostly thinking of what a crazy mix of scared and excited Ryuko and Satsuki were feeling at that very moment

Nonon had been totally casual about the bomb she just dropped on them, but they each felt a thrilling jolt pass through them. It was really happening! Ryuko and Satsuki were about to become parents, that alone set off a powerful pang in their hearts. But that paled in comparison to the thought that Nozomi, another immortal, was about to be born. The long-awaited moment, on



which the hopes of the entire world hinged, and it was just... happening. The future was rushing towards them and each of them in their own way felt completely unready.

Compared to *that*, nothing else really felt all that important.

“Say again?” Uzu said hesitantly.

Nonon realized the significance of what she’d said, and answered more seriously, ~ “*It’s true. Between the two of them, they eventually got it together and decided this was the best way. They’re in the operating room now, getting ready, and Shiro’s getting the hybridization machine set too. So just... like I said, a couple of hours – daybreak at the latest - and this will be over.*” ~

Uzu sighed and said, “Got it. Good luck over there, I guess. We’ll hold it down here.”

For the Kamui too, this was an exciting moment. But where their humans felt a terrible uncertainty as they heard the news that basically cinched human immortality – they stared an unknown and maybe frightfully different future in the face – for the kamui, there was nothing but hope. They would not be the last of their kind, now they knew that for sure. And so it was impossible for their wearers not to feel completely torn. Seijitsu said, as much to the other kamui as Uzu, *[This is crazy, but we still have our duty here. Let’s try to get it done! I want to be there to see our new... sister? Niece? I’m not sure, but I want to see her for myself.]*

*[Why would it be niece?]* Nekketsu asked as they flitted off towards the coast.

*[Well, I just don’t think sister sounds right, do you?]* Seijitsu protested.

*[What’s wrong with it?]*

*[She’s not really either, really,]* Reiketsu added.

*[Oh, shut up!]* And off they went, bickering as they sped into the distance. Which just left Mako floating beside Ira. The molten internal heat within him began to cool, and he sat down on the blasted earth to begin his vigil.

## Chapter End Notes

No, the fight is not over yet. I have a lot more for this battle and I've long since realized I'd personally rather just let it rip and make each scene as good as I can. I know that takes a while but since I've made it this far I'd rather not truncate what I wound up envisioning as basically a whole "Cell Arc" style series of fights, it's best to make it a worthy conclusion.

## Part Four of the Great Battle for the Future

October 2068

~~~~~

1:30 am

~~~~~

*“Cruel and vicious life, how it hurts us deep inside*

*Cold and wicked life, how we wish to make it right*

*Healing waits before us, beyond the night!”*

This was the hymn that resounded across the remains of the REVOCS fleet. Rei knew it well, after all, she had composed it - though the words themselves were simply a summary of all Ragyo’s promises. She hadn’t heard it in years, but now on all sides the REVOCS cultists were singing it as one. Crewmen sang as they loaded cannons and stoked the engines, captains sang as they plowed still-burning ships towards the shore, warriors sang as they charged Rei and were cut down one after another.

In their dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands they charged her. It was the only chance they had, because even a single kamui was more than their match. Even if, having now fought for several hours without rest, Rei was reaching the point of complete mental exhaustion.

Everything was a blur to her. She didn’t have a plan, or really much awareness of where she was or where she had just been. The demands of the moment were just too much to keep up with. At times she fought on the ruined seawall or in the town, leaping between piles of rubble. Hybrid beasts and zealous warriors, united in purpose, breached over the walls to attack her. Rei’s axe never stopped moving, and its curved edge sliced effortlessly through them. Sometimes when her pursuers crowded too thick, she leapt over to the ship and briefly engaged her flight mode to leave a trail of blood and explosions through the hordes that filled the sky. On board, she skidded across the deck, dragging her axe through people and the hull in equal strokes. By the time she had crossed from bow to stern, the ship was a floating husk – its towers and turrets shorn off and flung out into the waters – and she kicked it away to founder in the rocky shallows.

“HUUU-AAAAH!” She yelled as she fought. That was her effort to channel some of Satsuki’s Chi technique – something Rei had practiced but not yet mastered. But it only slowed the gradual divorce of her mind and body that was occurring. Because though she was simply exhausted, physically her energy and Furashada’s power were continually restored as the life-fibers of the slain soaked into them. Such a great volume came coursing in so fast that the rush was never-ending. Lilac-colored flames licked over Furashada’s lacy sleeves and blasted from his thrusters in voluminous plumes, a brilliant pure beacon in the dark night. It buoyed Rei, lifting her up from the inside like a great, swelling wave. The weightless feeling of her tiny body in comparison to all that boundless force only heightened how drunk she felt.

*This is a nightmare!*

Visions from Rei's past popped up through the blur of blood and guts and bullets and swords. Faces she vaguely recognized. Symbols and sigils she certainly did. They cursed her – apostate, heretic, traitor, demon – and she knew that she could have been in their place and she would have done just the same. And all the time they were singing, singing lies she composed to turn them into loyal followers. *There's no chance to save them anymore*, She and Furashada realized, *It's truly too late. Now that their Goddess has returned, there is no chance even one of those who remain will ever lose their faith.* They couldn't take this anymore. *They... have to die!*

Across the deck of a battleship, she saw a familiar face. A high-ranking commander, once a top Kiryuin Conglomerate exec, and with his wild eyes and jowly, pallid face he was a classic example of his type. A type that even back then Rei had seen as little more than an ugly necessity. He was flanked on either side by a dozen of his picked guard in two-star *Huscarl* Ultima Uniforms, and they charged Rei as he shouted, "Hououmaru, you traitorous filth! It's over for you! HahaHAAA!" His voice was surprisingly shrill and it cut through to Rei.

Rei finished dispatching a reptilian hybrid beast that had crawled over the ship's railing with a strike that sliced its head in two and then zipped over and was amongst the guards before they could react. "Don't you see? The goddess has returned, the life-fiber's divine plan is at last revealed! It is we chosen few who will live forever in paradise!" The guards were all taller than Rei and as they closed in and surrounded her, for a moment she was buried beneath but then a wave of force blasted them away and she leapt after. She caught one in midair and kicked him to the ground, where his Uniform's shielding could not save him from being impaled on the twisted end of a demolished turret. "You're all doomed! You and your false goddess Matoi, the arch-traitor Satsuki, the demon Jakuzure, those peasant swine Mankanshokus!" One by one she killed each of them in much the same way, not even thinking as she did. "Fall on your knees!" Their leader shouted, still not entering the fight, "Beg for forgiveness! And we shall grant you a merciful death a release you to the Goddesses' judgment! Only then, perhaps, can you be redeemed."

Rei decapitated him. She hadn't even finished dispatching his bodyguards, and they watched horrified as she whizzed past them and cut him down with a single, devastating swing. "RRRAAAAAAAGH!" She shouted. A fountain of blood poured down on her as the life-fibers eagerly slipped from his collapsing Ultima Uniform.

Something had come loose in Rei's mind. Intellectually, she would always pity the remaining REVOCS true believers. Misguided, victims of a power beyond their comprehension. They had to be killed but only at the utmost extremity, to protect others, and so she had a clinical attitude and tried to save as many as she could.

But she had no intellect left. No pity either. *Fuck him! Standing there, shouting at me instead of fighting. He knew what would happen if he did. He knew he wasn't really chosen.* Just as she had known when she saw Ryuko destroy the Honnouji Defcon Machine. *But he refused to see.*

She slammed her axe down into the deck. There was a bright flash as sparks flew, and down below the engine at last erupted. The ship was broken in two and fire blasted out from within its hull. Rei was left standing on the wreckage, chest heaving, shoulders hunched. She looked spring loaded, ready to lash out at anything that came near. Furashada's horns were growing longer, sprouting new spines and branches. Her fingers felt numb, his sleeves were contracting on them so tightly they formed a second skin. But neither of them noticed. If Furashada had warned Rei how her

blood was boiling, she might have had the wherewithal to pull back from the brink unlike someone like Ryuko. But they were too in sync for that.

The look in their eyes was barely human.

*“Too hell with all of you!”* They screamed. This at last seemed to give the REVOCS hordes pause, *“I have paid for my sins, I won’t be tormented by you anymore! YOU chose to kill the world!”*

A hand clapped on her shoulder. She whirled around, axe at the ready, but she didn’t swing. It was Uzu, and had a worried frown and a soft look in his eyes that instantly snapped through Rei’s rage.

It wasn’t Rei’s shouting that had frozen the REVOCS hordes, it was his sudden return along with Aikuro and Tsumugu. Just moments before they had watched as Rei snapped and killed the Kiryuin Conglomerate Exec. “Oh *god*,” Aikuro murmured. “No no no Rei! What the hell were we thinking leaving her alone!”

“Feel the energy coming off them!” Tsumugu exclaimed, “I hoped I’d never feel that again. It looks like she’s still verbal, maybe there’s time! We’ll have to get her out of there, and then try to find what can snap her out of it, *fast!*”

With a grim face, Uzu said, “I’m going in!” And tilted his wings to dive.

“Wait!” Aikuro said, “You pulled Nonon back from the edge of berserk, but she’s your girlfriend! Rei might not have that reaction, she might not see the difference between friend and foe!” Just the world berserk made all the kamui shudder.

“We’ve got to do something!” Uzu said, and he dove in regardless.

Thankfully Uzu’s gamble paid off. Rei saw him, she saw Aikuro and Tsumugu, and the nightmare crashed down around her. Somehow, the world had not ended behind her back and her family was still alive. It was as quick as blink, and then suddenly she jumped back, frightened. “Agh!” She gasped, and Uzu held his hands up (he had been wise enough to shrink and hide his sword).

“Hey-hey, whoa!” Uzu exclaimed. “It’s just me,” he said more softly, “It’s okay, everything’s alright.”

Rei looked around, frantically and confused. It truly did feel like she had just woken up. *How did I get here? Wasn’t I just fighting?* The last thing she remembered was fighting through a squad wearing *Huscarl* Ultima Uniforms. But her head was swimming, and she suddenly realized that she had lost consciousness for a moment. She gasped, immediately panicking that she must have been injured. She waved her hands all over her body, especially the back of her head, trying to find where she’d been hit to knock her out. Everything hurt like hell, especially her head and the tips of her fingers, but no wound. “Wha... what just happened?”

“Ah. Well, uh...” Uzu had not planned this far ahead. But he was relieved to see that Rei had made a recovery – she was staggering but keeping her feet, and didn’t seem to have progressed to the physical deformation stage. So, he waved to the others and they peeled off to engage the REVOCS forces. “You were kinda about to go berserk there for a sec.”

“*What!*” Rei was aghast. Somehow, she’d never thought it could happen to her. Going berserk, she’d never let such an extreme emotion take her over like that, not again. *And yet*, she

thought, *that was exactly what Ryuko said it was like. Boiling blood, and something that went just one step too far.* Rei wasn't sure if it was her who put it together or Furashada who presented it to her – their minds were still racing, truthfully - but she knew it was right. She clutched at her head and groaned.

Uzu tentatively crept up beside her and put a hand on her back, between her shoulders. To his surprise, she responded by turning towards him and hugging him. “Whoa!” Was all he could think to say. Even under the best of circumstances, Rei wasn't much for physical affection. “You're alright, you're alright,” He said, “Actually, come to think of it, let me see your fingers.”

Rei gasped and quickly held her hands up. She hadn't forgotten about the scars that crinkled up the ends of Nonon's fingers – Nonon wouldn't let anyone forget. Uzu took a look though, and saw that Rei's skin was smooth as ever. “They look good! And, uh, what about your teeth?” *Right, the fangs,* Rei thought, and she opened her mouth wide as if at the dentist. There was a fair bit of blood in there, the stress of fighting and getting knocked around tended to do that even with a kamui's defenses, but otherwise she seemed fine. “I, uh, I'm sure this seems odd to you,” Uzu chuckled awkwardly, “But the good news is your teeth don't look like they grew either!” He smiled, “Looks like you were in the really early stages, that's a pretty lucky break.” Rei nodded, and he added, “Though, I'm sure it doesn't feel that way.”

“No, no it does not,” Rei said emphatically. There was something comforting about the casual way Uzu approached it. It was as if he was back at Honnouji, and she was a student on his soccer team with a sprain. *This is a danger we all face, She and Furashada thought, I suppose knowing that we can come back from it is enough for him. But for us...* Looking around, they saw the battlefield in a new light. Being here was enough to ask of anyone, and Rei wasn't running away from her past by admitting it was just too much for her. *No. Once is enough.*

It was as if Uzu read her mind, “You ought to get out of here now. Can you still fly?”

“I... think so?”

“Head to the lab then, that's where Ryuko and Satsuki went,” He said. “We have things under control here. If you can't make it, I think there should still be some choppers that could pick you up if you can get clear of the storm.”

Rei nodded, and softly said, “Okay. Thank you.” She carefully picked her way past Uzu across the deck of the crumbling ship and recovered her axe from where it was lodged, then Furashada transformed into his dress-like flight form.

“Oh! And before you go,” Uzu turned to her and said, “I'm... sorry we left you here alone. We all are. Even with everything, that was insanely stupid. You're sure you're okay now? I can go with you.”

Rei's chest hurt, and not from any physical pain. That apology, of course it made sense and maybe it was the least she should have expected. And yet she felt as if she should be the one apologizing. *One kamui against what was left of REVOCS, if it were anyone else it would have been enough! And with Minazuki, another Ragyo, who might – would – destroy everything if she wasn't stopped, how can I back down now while I'm still breathing! They're all going to fight on, past exhaustion, past going berserk, past everything so that they can stand between the world and destruction.*

*And yet, he said he'd go with me. Even though he's definitely needed here. Just to make sure I was okay! Uzu had no idea the depth of gratitude he'd just earned, or how close Rei was to bursting into tears. He's a hero! They're all heroes! I don't deserve them.*

But there was much to do, and the horrifying feeling of nearly losing her mind was still too close. She just said, "I don't want to talk about it now. I just wish I could do more."

"Yeah, I get it."

"No you don't get it!" Rei said. "You're not the type for that. But this, all this senseless bloodshed? I don't think I can do it anymore!" She saw the stunned look on Uzu's face and quickly said, "I didn't mean that was bad, though. You're... well, it makes you a very reassuring person to see in a battle."

And with that she took off. She quickly dashed off to the west, over land, and so steered clear of Ira and Mako and took the fastest route out of the storm. Uzu was left shaking his head, smiling. He wasn't sure what exactly he'd done or how but he was proud, nevertheless. "Man, we just don't know what's going on inside her head, do we?"

*[Nope!] Seijitsu said, [But on the plus side, we're two-for-two on berserk-rescues, not bad at all!]*

More accurately, Uzu was left shaking his head and fighting. Almost as soon as Rei got away, some REVOCS fliers had managed to slip past Aikuro and Tsumugu and dive right at him. After the frustration of fighting Minazuki, they were practically therapeutic.

~~~~~

2:00 am

~~~~~

Mako was floating around Ira's fist, pacing in the air, essentially. He was kneeling in the middle of a flattened plain of mud and scorched tree trunks, and he held his closed hand out in front of him. The moment he settled down, he felt his adrenaline drain away and the battle fatigue set in. It made his *Kyojin* body feel stiff and almost as heavy as it actually was. He didn't want to know if he could still stand without dropping the transformation, but at least Minazuki was right where he could keep an eye on her. Not that she was going anywhere, he could feel her tapping around her little chamber with the tip of her sword – powerful thrusts, actually, but through all that living stone she failed to rattle him. Mako was tapping on the outside too, with her eyes furrowed and her cheeks puffed out.

"... Does your arm hurt?" Ira asked her.

"Hmm? Oh, no, no," She murmured distractedly.

Ira said, "**You want to be with Ryuko, don't you?**"

"No!" Mako shook her head vigorously, "We've got to stick this through! I'll be here for you!" Ira raised a skeptical eyebrow at her though, and Mako sighed, "Alright, yeah. I do. I'm sorry!"

**“No, you don’t have to apologize,” Ira said, “I wish I could be there too. Though, for such a huge moment in Ryuko’s life to pass by without you there... You should go, I think.”**

Mako immediately perked up, “Really?” Both she and Ira knew that she wouldn’t think about anything but Ryuko’s predicament – poor Ryuko, who was already terrified to be a mother and now this – unless she was able to go.

**“Yeah. Well, maybe you could wait until the others wrap the battle up? It shouldn’t be long now. Then I’ll have company, and you can go. Maybe even tell Ryuko the good news yourself,”** Ira suggested.

Mako grinned, “Yes! That’s what I oughta do! You hear that?” She shouted at Ira’s closed fist, “You hear that in there? You’re done! Ryuko’s – Ryuko’s gonna *kill* you!” She had to try it twice to work up the appropriate venom.

*“Tsk! Insignificant insects!”*

Mako and Ira recoiled as a chill ran through them. Minazuki’s voice rang out from within Ira’s hand, muffled like a dull old bell. She seemed to have the same ability to ratchet her voice up to an earsplitting shout that Ryuko had. She kept on tapping on the sides of her chamber, and threw in an extra strong one then to get their attention.

“That’s what you are, do you know that?” She said imperiously, “Like ants, scuttling to the defense of their Queen.”

“Wha – that is so not true!”

**“Mako –,”**

“No, seriously! You think you know everything, don’t you? Then you should know that Ryuko would do that for any of us! For anybody! That’s all she *wants* to do!” Mako yelled.

Minazuki sighed, bored by Mako’s trite naivety, “Sure, that’s what she *says*. But then look at what actually happens.”

**“Simply because we put ourselves on the line for Ryuko, you think she’s using us?”** Ira rumbled, **“That’s pathetic. Only someone like you, a leech on Kiryuin power and a traitor, could possibly think that way. You see everything as a transaction because you cannot understand family, compassion, or honor.”**

“No, I’m just describing the actual nature of your relationship with Matoi,” Ira did not impress Minazuki anymore than Mako. “She’s your queen bee, no question. You can’t reproduce without her. She is the center of your race of life-forms both human and life-fiber. And how do you get to live such cushy, luxurious lives? Her. Love and duty, these are just chemical reactions occurring in your brain to make you fulfill your role. No different from the pheromones that guide a worker ant, just more sophisticated. It’s an old game on this planet.”

Mako looked mystified. “What are you *talking* about? People aren’t ants! We can do what we want, we can decide for ourselves!” She railed. She crossed her arms and said to Ira, “That’s enough outta her! She really is just another Ragyo, always shouting about how much better than everyone she is like she knows everything! Let’s just ignore her, or could you squeeze her so tight she can’t say another word?”

“He can’t,” Minazuki beat him to it. “And I do. Know everything, I mean. Mhm! The whole deal; history, the universe, and the fate of everything all the way to the heat death at the end. That was my reward for becoming the new emissary of the life-fibers on this world. And that, in turn, was a reward for knowing only one thing, the most important thing: the true purpose of humanity. Humanity is meant to be used.”

Mako and Ira were pretending not to listen, but they were and that went double for their kamui. Even they, not the most intellectually minded, had some curiosity about what their enemy really thought past the REVOCS lies. And in any case it wasn’t like they had a choice, they couldn’t stop her from talking or from tapping away at her prison’s walls.

“Ragyo knew it too. She wanted to be part of the being that would use them, to become a goddess herself. I only wanted to stop being used – I learned later how foolish that was. But the rest of REVOCS, they didn’t know that. They believed that the purpose of humanity was to be lifted up to heaven, redeemed. That is a belief that makes humans much easier to use; they’ve been using it on each other for millennia. REVOCS kept trying to make new emissaries the entire time I was there, but it never worked. Submission mattered too, and they had that to spare, but when they were loaded into the God Egg, the hybridization chamber – it *really* does look like a gigantic egg, you’d be shocked to see it – when they felt the life-fibers enter them, hollow them out into puppets, they didn’t feel the rightness of it. They expected something painful, sure, but then something a bit more transcendent. You know what I mean? They wanted to feel themselves become something greater, not to have everything they were erased – which really is just such a selfish desire.”

“God...” Mako murmured, shuddering at the thought of it.

“Some of them flinched basically immediately and lucky them, they got to live. The ones who tried to struggle through it though, that was a different story. Honestly, they did it to themselves. But I had already been worn by Rosuketsu. I had already known the bliss of being used by the life-fibers, and though a certain *pink-haired psychopath* ripped that away from me along with all my memories of it, my body remembered. The levels of serotonin, the raw chemical...*bliss* I experienced – imagine this: the most mind-blowing sex you’ve ever had, and right when you orgasm, it freezes. You’re left feeling that forever. That’s what it’s like! Not to mention the psychological fulfillment of living in a dream world made just for me – though I don’t have to tell you about that part, Mankanshoku. It left a permanent mark on my biology, and the withdrawals were worse than anything you can imagine. From that point on I was finished as a human. Returning to my true purpose was all that was left for me.”

Mako gasped, and she zipped over to Ira’s ear and whispered, “You know what’s different from that, and when Junketsu took over Ryuko? Ryuko ripped Junketsu off on her own! But Nonon didn’t give Minazuki that chance.”

**“Hmm... If things went a bit different, she might not have turned out like this,”** Ira said. *I’ll have to remember this for Ranketsu. If they try to forcibly remove it, they might ruin a potentially innocent woman forever.* **“Not that I blame Nonon.”**

“Yes maybe, Gamagori, but things did not go differently,” Minazuki interjected loudly like a teacher chastising an interrupting student, “And that was the inevitable consequence of the direction of my life.”

“Oh, *come on*,” Mako groaned, “What’s so inevitable about you going and joining REVOCS, huh? That was your choice! Satsuki totally gave you a pass.”



“A pass? Maybe, but that was one I was never going to take. Do you remember when you were evicted from your apartment in the Tokyo suburbs, Mako? Before your family went to Honnouji?”

Mako gasped, “How do you –,”

“My pain, losing the fortune upon which I had lived and yours then were quite the same. The scale of the loss is not relevant, the chemical process creating the feeling does not change. And after such a blow, what else could I do? I’m guessing you think that’s stupid. Well, this will surprise you: I agree. As a human, I didn’t rate much. Vain, undisciplined, and uneducated, grasping at an image of ‘culture’ to preserve my illusory superiority over the masses. What was really stupid was that I bought that line about REVOCS fighting against Satsuki’s tyranny,” She laughed to herself, “What tyranny? I had no clear perspective on society at all, or else I would have known that was just a lie appealing to my naked self-interest. But just my luck that I happened to be the most easily used person on the planet, because it was a lie that led me to enlightenment. And now I do get to be superior, truly superior to every human on this miserable rock. And all for the low, low price of killing Ryuko and her unborn child.”

“Oh yeah? Well tough luck for you, ‘cuz you’re not getting out of there until it’s too late! Ryuko’s gonna wipe the floor with you like it’s nothing!” Mako shouted.

Minazuki scoffed, “Pfft! You won’t be able to hold me forever,” As if to prove her point, she tapped on the side of her little chamber again. She put a tremendous force into it, but Ira despite the loud, sharp crack that echoed through Ira’s body it didn’t shake him any. “And I know that the two of *you* cannot kill me, or you would have done so already. When I do get out, I will kill both of you. But that doesn’t have to be that way,” On the outside, Mako and Ira looked at each other incredulously. That couldn’t mean what they thought it meant, could it? “Here’s the thing. I’m only telling you this because I’m *not* your superior. Or well, only your superior in power, not in the way I am superior to humans which is just a fact of the universe. You are no longer fully human. And I’m not just talking about the half of your psyches that has been split off into your Kamui, either.”

*[If you think you know everything, then how could you call us that!]* Now it was Tonbo who protested, *[We are much more than just ‘halves’!]*

“Oh no, I do understand that,” Minazuki answered; clearly she could hear him. “Not fully grasping the nature of Kamui was Ragyo’s big mistake, one which has since been resolved. I’m fully aware that both halves more than meet the mark of ‘personhood’. What I mean is that you’ve already moved beyond simple humanity. You’ve been eating more lately, haven’t you? And it doesn’t seem to affect your weight quite the same as before either does it?” That struck a chilling note because they had all noticed that long ago. “The change has already begun. And because you aren’t human anymore, I actually have some reason to talk to you. You don’t have to play the role of insects; you can choose not to be used. You and I don’t have to be enemies. And if you were to simply step aside and let me deal with Ryuko, we wouldn’t be. I’ll tell you right now, I have no intention of destroying your planet. Earth is finished; the life-fibers can’t harvest humanity anymore, so they have no use for it. It’s Ryuko who is the threat, she wants to take the fight to the life-fibers. Her reasons are her own. But if you let me simply eliminate that threat, you’ll be free to live out the rest of your lives. What you do with your power then will be up to you.”

Mako and Ira were stunned. Ira got over it first, “**Wha – AHAHAHA! You’re joking! All this lecturing, just to ask us to betray her?**” He laughed on for a moment, and seeing that

made Mako smile – listening to Minazuki had been starting to creep her out. **“You can’t be serious! You – you didn’t really think that would work, did you?”** He managed to say, **“You’d have an easier time convincing us the Earth was flat, and I’ve seen it curve with my own eyes.”** After one last chuckle, he abruptly scowled again and said flatly, **“NO DEAL.”**

Minazuki sighed, “Yes, I figured as much. To be honest I would have preferred to have this conversation with some of your more rational siblings.”

**“It would have gone the same way.”**

“Maybe. But, seeing as I am meant to do this anyway, and you said yourself you have nothing else to do but sit here and try to ignore me, what I’m going to do now is explain to you in terms even you can understand why letting me kill Ryuko is in your best interest as well as mine.”

They really did try to ignore her too. **“So. I doubt Ryuko will be up for that little party she was talking about after all this is over,”** Ira said. Ryuko’s initial plans for after Nozomi was born didn’t account for it happening in the midst of the last, and largest, REVOCS attack.

Mako smiled mischievously. Ira’s confidence was reassuring, and this seemed like a good way to stick it to Minazuki. “Nah, but that wasn’t really meant as, like, a *party* party,” she said, “She more meant a gathering with all of us, know what I mean? Still, no way she isn’t just done after this. Give her a good night’s sleep though, and then we’ll see.”

**“Right,”** Ira nodded, **“Then, maybe while you go get your arm stitched up, I’ll head home and heat up the croquettes from last night?”**

Mako looked thoughtful and said, “Hmm. Yeah, that’s not a ba-,”

“-Two boys were born, in the same town and to well-off families,” Minazuki talked right over her, and it was such a non-sequitur that they couldn’t ignore it. “Early on, one became infatuated with the things money could buy. Cars, vacations, clothes, and later power, fame, and women. The other, however, merely wanted to do his duty, provide for his family and make them proud. They both studied and worked hard and tried their best to fit in and make good impressions. In time they both had distinguished careers, lived the lives of rich men, and got married and had children. Outwardly they had both accomplished their goal, and yet inside they were never fully content. For the first there was always more to be gained, another car or house to buy, and for the second there was always some chance to fail, some way to disappoint his parents, his wife, his children. Outwardly, they lived such similar lives, and yet their perceptions of things – their ideas, their values – couldn’t be more different. If they had the power to make those perceptions a reality, the power of a god to reshape the world to fit their image of it, their worlds would be completely incompatible. Would you like to live in either of their worlds?”

“So what?” Mako said snidely, “People think different things, what’s the big deal?”

**“People’s beliefs matter now? Didn’t you just finish telling us how humans are mere tools?”**

“They’re certainly more sophisticated than a *hammer!*” Minazuki said with a laugh, “And if you believe that is a sophisticated ability, then imagine how a being with a mind thousands of times more complex than a human’s might perceive the world. One who does have the power to reshape your entire world, make it the way she wants. *That* is what ‘Ryuko Matoi’ really is!”

Minazuki didn't need to see her captors to know she had their full attention now. In a low voice, as if beginning a ghost story, she said, "This may be hard for you to accept, but Ryuko's multidimensional body – that huge invisible monster behind her that wowed the scientific world – *that* is who she really is. Yes, Mankanshoku. That huge eye. Creepy, wasn't it? And when she goes and jumps out of her body, she doesn't stay the Ryuko you know. She's being brought back into the fold with the rest of herself. And within her true self is a mind so vast and powerful, made from so many life-fibers, that you can't even imagine it. As if every neuron in your brain was another copy of yourself. Now, she may only be learning to use that power now, but with time – and she has quite a lot of time – she will master it. And as she does, the little dream world she makes for herself each time she crosses over will grow. She's told you all about that already, hasn't she Mankanshoku? First it was just a blank void, then a room, then a field by a lake, and... what did she say last time? Mountains? Forests? A shrine on the highest peak? That world is not just a figment of her imagination, it is another dimension that exists within her, as real as the one in which you've lived your entire life. You've actually been to a dimension just like it, Mankanshoku. Remember? When you broke Mato from Junketsu's control? Only there, she's the one who sets the rules. In your world, Ryuko Mato has the power to become *a* god. But within herself, she can be *the* God. And the greater her power grows, the more complete her universe will become. And the less use she'll have for any of you. She won't be alone there anymore, soon she'll be able to even create *life*! *People*! And unlike the ones in this world, those ones will do what she wants, they will *be* exactly how she wants them. Now, for you lucky few, you might get to come along with her. But then you'll be living in her universe, under her rules. Are you *sure* that her ideals will make a world you want to live in? Everything she does, though she might claim otherwise, is to reach that goal."

Ira tilted his head over to Mako and said as softly as he could, "**You getting all this?**" The secret inner workings of the life-fibers was one of those things he knew the others had under control; asking about it would only slow their research down. So he was going mostly off Mako's secondhand stories about Ryuko crossing over to talk to Senketsu. And he had trouble seeing what was wrong with that, if anything the possibility that Senketsu might come back was something Tekketsu was really looking forward to like all the Kamui.

"Kind of," Mako whispered back, "But she's got it all wrong! I mean..." And then she wheeled around and shouted at Minazuki, "*How* could you think that Ryuko would just bail on the real world! After everything she went through with Junketsu! She knows what's real!"

"N-no, you're not quite understanding," Minazuki said, obviously surprised to hear Mako say basically the opposite of what she'd just explained but trying to stay polite-sounding, "It *is* real, and as a matter of fact so were Junketsu's visions, that's what made them so unbearably compelling. If she starts making people there, they will be as real as you are."

"Yeah? Well maybe to *you*! Ira's right, you really don't care about anybody but yourself! Well Ryuko's not like you! The only thing she wants to do with her powers is to use them to help people!"

"No, it's not," Minazuki sighed.

"Is so!"

"No, really, it's not."

"Is so!"

“No -,”

“Is so!”

“Oh, will you just shut up and listen! You *imbecile!*” Minazuki abruptly snapped. It caught Mako off guard, but then she grinned smugly. “I’m trying to *help* you!”

“No you’re not!” Mako was quick on the draw this time.

“Yes I -,” Minazuki stopped herself while Mako giggled. But she stopped when Minazuki huffed, “Fine! Believe what you want. But in a couple hours, when you see that Ryuko’s newborn daughter is not a new hybrid named Nozomi but just *more of her*, don’t come crying to me.”

“Well, that’s – wait, what’s that supposed to mean?” Mako asked. That was foreboding, especially because she sounded so confident.

“You think you know Matoi so well. But ‘your Ryuko’ is just one of a million personalities within her real self. When she crosses over, do you really think she’s the one in charge? No! She is subsumed, washed away under their tides. She’s just a tiny piece of a far greater intellect, its emissary, just as I am the emissary of the life-fibers. A little shard that’s meant to look human, act human -,”

[*- You don’t exactly act very human,*] Tonbo shot in.

“- act human *enough*, and through which it can exercise its power. And I know what you’re thinking: ‘Ryuko’s so independent she won’t even let a teacher tell her where to sit for an hour, how could she ever let her whole identity be subsumed by some alien hive-mind? How could she be happy with that?’ Of course she’s happy with that, that’s all she’s ever been! You’ve been used, made as minions and sold a lie, the Ryuko you know is nothing more than the puppet of a life-fiber entity whose sole purpose is to use her to amass more power until she can consume the life-fiber network and become God! It moves her around like a chess piece, gaining power and followers, and tonight will be the crowning moment. She will insert her own life-fibers into Nozomi, not the ones Iori has prepared for the task, and so the hybrid created will be not a new individual, but another part of her. And with two emissaries, she will be unstoppable. She will drain the life from this world to build her own, and that will only be the beginning! Don’t believe me? Just wait and see.”

**“Humph!”** Ira grunted, **“Your story would be troubling – if it was true. But it’s flawed,”**

“Yeah, that’s right!” Mako agreed, “Hear that?”

**“When has Ryuko ever not been the Ryuko we know? We know exactly how Isshin Matoi brought her into existence. It’s pretty clear, a newborn baby’s unformed psyche can merge with the life-fibers to make a new being, whereas anyone else’s will either bend or break. We have his notes, and Iori and Izanami used them to make a new hybridization machine. Obviously, you think it’s going to work too. All her life Ryuko thought she was human, and so all these split personalities would have too.”**

“Ah, but that’s the thing, you have his notes on what he *thought* he did! But he was deceived too!” Minazuki said with some enthusiasm, “The being you call Ryuko was alive long

before then, for millions of years! It is an interloper, a survivor from a younger age of the cosmos before the life-fibers were united, and it came to your planet in search of someone who planned to fight against their fate. It found Soichiro – and you don't have to lie to me, I know all about *him* and Ragyo – and began to whisper to him. He thought they were his own ideas, but his inspiration was in fact planted knowledge. And his hybridization machine was not made to create new life, but to let *it* in. I know this will be hard for you to accept, but what do you think happened? It's impossible. A human spirit and life-fibers, existing as one and equally? Do you consider the bacteria in your guts to be your equals? It is an enticing lie, but something like that has simply never happened. And I know what you're thinking, 'Well, maybe Ryuko could be the first',” Minazuki raised her pitch into a mockery of Mako's voice. “No. You have no idea how old this universe is, how many millions of civilizations the life-fibers have created and ended. Do you really think you are the first to try to resist? The only reason you succeeded was because of her help, that's a power you could never have without outside intervention.”

“Wow...,” Mako sounded astonished, “that's... COMPLETELY INSANE! You say you know everything, but you don't know *Ryuko* at all! When has she *ever* been *happy* about what she is? She's always been completely aware of how weird, and scary, and totally nuclear meltdown-type dangerous it is to not be human!” She was raising her hands above her head the way she often did when trying to steal everyone's attention for a rant, only given she was still holding her bat it looked like she was about to clobber Ira's hand.

Ira said, “**Mako, you know she can't see-**,”

“- For years now she's been saying like ‘Oh no, what if this thing takes over me?’! If she was all casual about it, yeah that'd be a lil' sketchy, but she's so not! She didn't even want to have a hybrid baby, Satsuki talked her into that! And she didn't want to be queen either, Nonon did that one! You want me to believe she's been lying this whole time, but everything you said she's doing is the exact thing she's most worried about! And you know what else, she took an acting class back in college and dropped it because she got mad she couldn't do an American accent right for a skit! She's not that good an actor!”

“Oh, is that so!” Minazuki retorted, “You know your Ryuko so well, is that it Mankanshoku? Then, I'm sure you know all about Ragyo and her older sister!”

Mako said nothing. Once again, she didn't like where this was heading but she stayed resolute and kept brandishing her bat over her head.

“No? Well, that's odd, because I know Matoi has looked through Ragyo's memories quite extensively. She must have seen it. But why wouldn't Matoi tell you that her mother had an older sister who she was in love with, and who loved her back? And who she killed after a fight they had? Yes, quite the turbulent relationship they had. Now, don't you think *that* would bother Ryuko? Strange how she never mentioned it to you.”

There was a pause. “**Hold on, I'm confused,**” Ira said, “**So Ryuko is meant to be a reincarnation of Ragyo now? How does that fit your story? I thought – but weren't your human minions trying to capture Ryuko for that purpose? And Ryuko's been worried about that too, what, since she got into fashion design?**” Mako nodded vigorously, “**Right, see?**”

“No no no, I'm merely saying that you don't know Matoi as well as you think you do.”

“Well, I know her well enough to know she wouldn't just go airing old Kiryuin laundry like that! And besides, how could she tell someone! How could she tell that to Satsuki! I-I mean,

nobody's saying she's perfect," Mako said, and looked to Ira.

He understood what she was getting at, **"No. I know, if that is true, how could she ever tell Satsuki? Of course, she should have, but for Ryuko the possibility that Satsuki would take it bad sounds just about too much to bear. In fact, that only makes me more certain that Ryuko is human, in the way that matters anyway."**

"Yeah!" Mako cheered, "And you know what else – and this is the last thing I'm gonna say – is I remember that Ryuko said she watched through Ragyo's memories with Senketsu. With *Senketsu*! And you can't explain Senketsu! If Ryuko was really just part of a wannabe life-fiber network and she was just tricking us, then how could her dad have made Senketsu? And she and Senketsu, they fought all the time! My folks thought she was totally crazy! I even heard his voice! So you can't tell me that he was just another split personality, no way! And since Senketsu is real, then so is Ryuko!"

"Ah yes, Senketsu," Minazuki said, "But you know, the funny thing about Senketsu is that we have not detected him since the death of Ragyo. The life-fibers can't sense his presence, at all. Why are you so sure he survived? How can you be sure of what Matoi has told you about him?"

It was Tonbo who answered that one. *[I am sure,] He said seriously, [Because I am here. I'm living proof! Without Senketsu, Ryuko would never have made me. She wouldn't know how, and she wouldn't even want to. I wasn't made for battle, I was made because she wanted Mako to experience the special connection she had with Senketsu!]*

Minazuki's response was terse, "Yes, and look how well that's going. Once again, the difference between what people say and what they do eludes you."

*[Wha – you really are crazy! I'm only here fighting because of **you**!] The ridiculousness of it all was starting to get to Tonbo, [You want us to believe that Ryuko did all of these things because she wants to, but you're ignoring the elephant in the room. Everything she's done, it's all because **you** won't let us live in peace! It's you life-fibers who won't stop coming until we're dead! Well I've had enough of it! After tonight, we won't be living in your shadow anymore and that's a **fact**!]*

*Tonbo's got Mako's improvisation skills, doesn't he, Tekketsu (and Ira, but mostly Tekketsu) thought. She was proud of him, and Ira was proud of Mako. I knew she had it in her. She'd never show she could stare down a monster like Minazuki and not be intimidated, but then when the moment comes she jumps right in like it's nothing. How cute is that! He was in the middle of wishing her could hug her when –*

*\*TING!\**

*\*CRACK!\**

He jolted in pain. With a grimace Ira lifted his hand, which looked all the same on the outside. But inside, as he felt the panic rise, he realized that what he was feeling was horribly real. After thousands just like it, a stab from Minazuki's sword had finally cracked open a weak spot in her cage, and it burned like a rotting ulcer.

*[What was that!]*

"Ira! What's wrong!"

**“No, no no no no no!”** He muttered, gritting his teeth through the pain. Another shock as the sword plunged back in. Minazuki was done talking now, and from this moment on the pain became a constant blur. In and out, in and out, it must have been hundreds of times every second as she painstakingly widened a tiny crack into a wide hole. Inside, Ira could feel the internal shell of her cage cracking away, and bubbling molten rock dripping into it from his *Kyojin* forms innards. It was excruciating, a raw nerve. But Ira was familiar with pain, and it only took him a second to get his cool back. He clutched at his wrist with his free hand and said, **“She’s – she’s breaking out!”**

“WHAT!” Mako immediately panicked, “W-WHAT DO WE DO!”

**“RUN!”** He yelled at her, **“YOU NEED TO GO, NOW!”**

“NO! NO WAY!”

**“THERE’S NO TIME! CALL THE OTHERS, TELL THEM WHAT’S HAPPENING, AND THEN GO AS FAST AND AS FAR AS YOU CAN!”** Ira barked at her, **“SHE’LL KILL YOU IF SHE CAN, DON’T YOU DOUBT IT!”**

Mako followed that order, and swiftly pinged the others. “I-IRA’S IN BIG TROUBLE!” She screamed, “SHE’S GONNA GET OUT!”

Ira could vaguely hear the dismay on the other side of Mako’s earpiece, but he was much more focused on what Minazuki was doing. She’d made her whole wide enough to worm into, and now she was inside the coursing magma within Ira’s arm. Still swinging her sword to beat back the liquid, she must have been enduring tremendous heat but it didn’t seem to bother her any. And to Ira’s mounting horror she wasn’t just shooting to blast through his fist and into the air. She was working – at an awful speed – directly up his arm. She was about halfway up his forearm when he said, **“She’s... going after my heart! My real body!”**

*“Ira!”* Mako was on the verge of helpless tears. She couldn’t bring herself to run, watching as Ira stared at his arm, tracking Minazuki’s movement but unable to do anything about it, filled her with such dread that it froze her in place.

**“In that case,”** He decided, standing up with gritted teeth and brow furrowed by exertion, **“There is only one option.”**

His No Dachi, still in its battleship-sized expanded form, was standing with its tip buried in the earth. He reached over, and with a great wrenching twist that made the ground shake uprooted it. *Now comes the hard part*, he thought. He straightened his back, extended the arm Minazuki was in, and then with a huge breath, lifted the sword across his chest above it.

Mako understood what he was about to do. *“Ira, NO!”*

He jerked his head over to her suddenly, **“Why are you still here? GO, NOW! While you still have a headstart!”**

“But what about you! Your arm!”

**“I’LL BE FINE!”** He bellowed, **“JUST GO!”**

Mako yelled, and this time she did go. *[Don't look back!]* Tonbo told her, *[We've just got to believe he'll be alright!]*

But neither of them could resist the urge. As they sped away, Mako turned so she was zipping along with her shoulder twisted almost all the way around. Traveling at max speed, Tonbo could cover almost two miles a second. But that wasn't fast enough that she couldn't still see Ira in the receding distance.

Still with his back stiff and feet firmly planted, he turned his head away and closed his eyes. A couple of huge breaths through his nose, and then he roared, **"COME ON THEN! I CAN TAKE IT!"** And brought his sword down just below his shoulder with all his might.

**"RAAAAAAAAAA – AAAAAAAAH! AAAAAGH! GAAAAGH! AAAAAAAAAGH!"**

His warcry, and its transformation into a howl of pain, overshadowed completely the titanic crunch as the blade fell cleanly through his arm. He was but a silhouette, black stone against the black sky, but the smoldering lava that poured from the wound was branded into the night. Great waterfalls of it traveled down to the earth along with the arm, now inert and lifeless, and then splashed back up as it hit the ground with a massive shockwave. Sulfurous fumes leached out from it, hissing as they billowed up and surrounded Ira. He kept screaming.

But inside, the pain was so severe, so blinding, that it reached a level Ira had never experienced before. He thought he was well versed in the principles of masochism, but this was so all consuming that to endure it and stay conscious brought him a sort of clarity. *The rain is getting worse*, he thought as he stumbled back and stared up unseeing at the sky, *did Mako do that?* He wasn't sure if she had seen that, and if she had he hoped she'd forgive him for making her witness it. *Forget about that, where is Minazuki?* He wondered. *Not killing me*, came the response (this might have been Tekketsu, the line was blurrier now than ever). *That's good enough. Any amount of pain is preferable to that. Yes, anything can happen to my body, even my real body, and it won't hurt the real me. I'm still here.*

And for a brief moment Ira felt the certain existence of his own consciousness, and pondered how his arm would still be laying there generations on, until the dirt piled up and trees grew above it and it became a hill like any other.

Meanwhile, a gigantic blast of rainbow light exploded from the open end of his arm. Minazuki burst free, as immaculate and glittering as ever. Ira might have been completely unable to fight at that moment, but as she floated before him she spared him only a peeved, "Humph!" Before wheeling around and launching high into the sky. In a second, she was only a line of rainbow light quickly carving it way southward.

Uzu, Aikuro, and Tsumugu could only watch all this from a distance – they briefly backed off from the battle to see but were still too far away to get there in time.

"No! Ira you psycho what did you do!" Uzu shouted. Above even Minazuki being free, he was terrified that Ira might be about to die.

"I'm going after her!" Tsumugu was already flying higher into the sky in an arc. His wings were transforming into the sleek black shape of a stealth bomber; his fastest form. "I'm the only one who can catch up!"



He hadn't reached max speed though when Aikuro was suddenly alongside him. *[Wait!]* Nekketsu sounded breathless - her thrusters were being pushed to the absolute limit just keeping up *[Take us with you!]*

The wind rushed by much too fast for the humans to talk, but Reiketsu said, *[Are you crazy! Stay here, fight REVOCs!]*

*[Can't do that!]* Nekketsu said, *[You'll need all the help you can get!]* Aikuro for his part communicated only with a raised eyebrow. "Come on bro", it said to Tsumugu, "Together, for old times' sake!"

Tsumugu smiled and held out a hand, and as Aikuro took it Reiketsu said, *[Alright, but hold on tight! And don't even **try** to open your mouth!]*

## Part Five of the Great Battle for the Future

October 2068

~~~~~  
2:17 am  
~~~~~

They caught up with Minazuki over the mountains of south-central Hokkaido. Out from under Tonbo's unnatural storm, the dark peaks and pine clad valleys were framed by the faint purple glow of the night sky. Minazuki flew high above the tallest mountains, but Tsumugu banked still higher, ready to plunge down on her. Before he did so, Reiketsu addressed Nekketsu and Aikuro (the rush of wind made it impossible for the humans to speak).

*[Before we start, Tsumugu and I have two things to tell you,]* She said.

*[Right! Fire away!]* Nekketsu replied.

*[First, we've been carrying these around awhile,]* A hatch opened in part of the armored chassis that connected Tsumugu to his wings. One of Reiketsu's prehensile little hands emerged, a long black thread crisscrossed by glinting life-fibers. It was wrapped around two weapons – a thick glove and gauntlet and a set of short blades mounted onto a single handle like a large tuning fork. Both were wrought in a bold green and black and Aikuro instantly recognized them. *[There's no better time to use them, and you might need a backup weapon.]*

His and Nekketsu's eyes lit up. *[The tailor's glove and dagger!]* she gasped.

*[That's right,]* Reiketsu said as Aikuro used his free hand to grab them. The glove he dexterously slid on (he hadn't trained for years as a secret operative to not be able to put a glove on one-handed), and the dagger he wrapped around his wrist using a thin cord on the hilt. *[With such little reach they're too risky to use as primary weapons, but if you can manage to lay a hand on her, the dampening field in the glove will weaken her so she can't break your grip. And then, plunge the dagger into her and press the button on the hilt,]* Aikuro did so. The two outer blades slammed together on the middle – creating shearing cross-cuts where the edges met. *[That's a wound which even she won't survive.]*

*[Got it,]* Nekketsu was as stoic as her friend, given the circumstances. *[What's the other thing?]*

*[We've brought another weapon as well. Something that we developed on our own, so that REVOCS would never learn of it. A weapon that – if we can land the shot – will definitely kill Minazuki.]*

But she wasn't *that* stoic. Something about the weight Reiketsu put into those words put a shiver through Nekketsu's sleeves, *[What... kind of weapon?]*

*[You'll see. What matters is that it is so devastating that we can't fire it without risk of hitting you. So when we yell 'Take Cover', you have to do it **immediately**. Put something solid in*

*between you and us – a rock, an overpass, a mountain, bury in the ground if you have to. We can't risk giving her more than a split second of warning. Do you understand?]*

*[Yeah. Yeah I do.]*

*[Good. Our main goal here is to buy time for Ryuko. We will try to kill Minazuki if we can, but staying alive and keeping her occupied are the top priorities. If you feel tired, I'm still carrying some capsules of spare life-fibers for an energy boost.]*

*[We're ready!]* They were within range of Minazuki, a glittering speck zooming through the sky. Aikuro watched her with eagle-eyed focus, readying one of his hardened life-fiber arrows. Its head was made of two shearing blades – miniature scissors, really – and he was ready to use it at the first opportunity. *[Drop – now!]* Nekketsu said simply, and Aikuro and Tsumugu released their grips on each other's wrists.

Their paths separated in two long arcs, Aikuro plunging down with inherited momentum and Tsumugu peeling off still higher. A series of dull pops rang out from Tsumugu's machines as Reiketsu released a cloud of submunitions. Self-assembling gun platforms, delayed-fuse explosives, aura-dampening pulse magnets, and plain old chaff all streamed out from tiny ports. They hissed as propulsion canisters decoupled and let out long trails of smoke, then fanned out across the surrounding mountains. Some would still be flying long after battle was joined, spreading far and wide in every direction. For this fight, Tsumugu demanded that the terrain be his to control.

Aikuro had a much more direct approach. Reiketsu languidly drew back the 30-foot long full extent of their bow, letting each expanding segment click smoothly into place. Firing a hyper velocity projectile at a minuscule target while they both raced along at mach speeds was no easy feat, but with human and kamui aiming together it was possible. The arrow stretched like taffy cracked across the sky right for Minazuki's neck.

But they were too slow. Maybe it was only possible for them to be too slow. One moment Minazuki was in one place and then, shimmering like a mirage, she was ever so slightly to the left. The arrow passed right by her, stirring the jewels in her hair. At seemingly the same moment the ground below tore apart in a huge fountain of dust and rock. Aikuro made an annoyed "Tch!" noise.

She couldn't dodge Tsumugu, however. He descended on her from on high, disgorging dozens of missiles in a cone around them. When she tried to dodge, he curved with her and they zipped into the hail of metal until at last they clashed. Below them, the missiles impacted and their incendiary payloads brought forth a glow almost as powerful as Minazuki's. The noise of the repeated explosions was a dull rupturing, the popping of huge balloons.

"You again!" Minazuki snarled. "Don't you know you can't win against me!"

Tsumugu pressed hard on her, parrying furious blows and bending them back though his arm might tremble as he did so. They landed on the forest floor (or what was left of it), blasting flames away with a roaring shockwave. His face was stone severity, and he said, "I'm about to teach you the same lesson I once taught Ryuko."

" 'It takes more than strength to win a fight?' " Minazuki laughed, though that harsh noise was merely a gesture towards the concept. Tsumugu brought his shield hand up. He had traded out the needle gun he usually held there for something altogether more deadly, a gun like an absurdly

upscaled revolver. He fired and it barked out hardened life-fiber tipped slugs, more like harpoon tips than bullets. They sank into Minazuki and sent her flying away. She was unphased. As the fist-sized holes in her chest and the dress above it sealed up, Minazuki said, "I prefer the other thing you said to Ryuko, way back when. 'It's a parasite'!" She surged back in for another attack. As she and Tsumugu fought, the fire that raged around them parted behind her and Aikuro dove in. She managed to keep the both of them at bay with ease, until with a whisper between their kamui they dashed back and faded into the flames.

"What happened?" She yelled into the blazing orange walls around her clearing. She could feel them out there wheeling around her, the fires were just a visual obstruction to them not any real hazard. They were close. If she lunged for one of them or tried to run, the other would be at her back immediately. "What about the oaths you swore?" She lifted her free hand, and her fingers stretched and whipped around, instantly churning into a storm that began to buffet back the fire. But from somewhere within it, invisible even to her acute senses, an automatic needle gun fired and stung her. She retracted her fingers in consternation and in that moment both Tsumugu and Aikuro zoomed in at her from opposite sides. She managed, just barely, to beat them back and as they continued to press the attack she shouted, "You swore to protect humanity, and yet here you are, fighting so that your species might be nothing more than *vessels* for the power you sought to defeat? What happened?"

"I think you know!" Tsumugu grunted. He and Aikuro were both generally aware of how Minazuki had tried to parlay with Mako and Ira, and were equally unwilling to hear her out.

"Hmm. Perhaps," Minazuki said, and they fought on without exchanging a word. Keeping Minazuki pinned in one place was impossible, for in a long bout of strikes and parries her superior speed and inhuman precision would win out. They would make a fatal mistake, they knew this, and so when either felt their focus slacken even for an instant an impulse passed between their kamui and both Aikuro and Tsumugu backed off. Then Tsumugu's traps came into play, because all those gun emplacements and mines were hidden amidst the burning forest and would crack open at Minazuki if she tried to pursue or flee. That momentary disruption was the difference between life and death. A bomb going off in her face, shredding skin into pink ribbons for but a second, or a cannon thumping out a few shots that forced her to slalom which they dashed straight forward (they all bashed right through trees and even the crests of hills), these were the stall tactics that kept her from catching and killing them.

But it was still a close thing. They had been fighting for about fifteen minutes when Minazuki managed to get past Tsumugu's guard. He was falling back, dashing away from her with the jet wings on his back roaring and buffeting flames everywhere, but she leapt into the air and after him and he couldn't get away. Wrapping her free hand around one of his wings, she dropped her sword into it with apparent relish. The scissor blades snapped together and crunched the wing. It squealed a horrible metallic note in protest. They twisted through the air, trailing smoke and glittering light. Like a hawk seizing its prey, Minazuki wrenched the wing off, tearing it into a storm of metal shards, bolts, and smoke.

[*Ough!*] Reiketsu grunted in shock as the threads of herself that extended into it and knit it together were ripped away. Minazuki raised her sword to hack away again, but *\*BZZZT!\** one of Tsumugu's self-assembling railguns fired (he was as much in love with the things as Houka and Shiro were). It punched through Minazuki's forearm, forestalling the killing blow, and in that moment new metal erupted from inside of Reiketsu. She watched as a new wing emerged, tiny plates snapped into perfectly machined place one after another, engines already spinning up before they were fully formed. It seemed to dawn on Minazuki then what she was dealing with; unless she

hit the man within, Reiketsu was an ironclad warrior with regeneration abilities not that far behind her own. Tsumugu noted the look of consternation on her face as he zoomed off – she wouldn't pursue this time because Aikuro was right behind her now.

It took him only a brief moment to bank around and dive back at her again, and now she had to fend both of them off once more. “I suppose now you'll say you can ‘play this game all night!’” She shouted at them. But they did no such thing. The most she got out of them was a few “YA!”s and “HA!”s as they put their all into pressing on her defenses as much as they could, until when they felt a bit overextended they abruptly broke off once again and vanished into the forest fire (with a few extra incendiary bombs lobbed her way for good measure). She pulled a coquettish pout and said, “Oh, you're no fun!” But they could see that the furrow on her brow was very real. She knew she was running out of time.

~~~~~  
3:31 am  
~~~~~

As the night dragged on, Aikuro and Tsumugu lead Minazuki on a merry chase across the mountains and through the deserted towns of southern Hokkaido. The two of them kept close - by the standards of a kamui battle, anyway, so never more than a few hundred yards away. *[This fight has a formula,]* was what Reiketsu had realized, *[The distance between us and Nekketsu always has to be much shorter than that between either of us and Minazuki. When she charges one of us, the other needs to be able to rush in and support them immediately!]* She pictured it like something out of a physics book from Tsumugu's college days, a triangle with their's, Aikuro's, and Minazuki's positions as the corners. She was aware of Nekketsu's aura nearby, and Minazuki blazing away behind them, so Tsumugu was aware of them as well. Not that he really needed to be told; he and Aikuro fell into this mutually dependent fighting style as naturally as they breathed. *[The human survival instinct sure is amazing,]* Reiketsu thought.

The fight had long since lost any trace of subtlety or elegance. No fancy swordplay, none of the deft tricks and leaping flourishes that were so fun in the sparring ring. Simply keeping up was such a mental load that trying to come up with a trick that might slip past her defenses was just too much. Usually, the complex dance of a kamui fight was lost on a human observer, but now the chaos of bolts of light and flame bouncing off each other was all there was to it. They just crashed into Minazuki, again and again. On the defense it was all they could do to keep up blocking her, on the attack the best way to slow her down was to just hack away, try and batter through her defenses and gouge a few hits into her. If they had a moment to think, they might have realized they were scared out of their wits. They might have reviewed just how many times in the last hour or so they had thought *Whoa, nearly died there!* and realized it was only a matter of time. They might have realized they'd given up even the pipe dream of actually killing Minazuki.

Not without Tsumugu's secret weapon, at least.

But they didn't get a chance to think, because every second they spent alive and moving, keeping Minazuki busy, was another second they had bought for Ryuko. Whenever Aikuro felt the power in Nekketsu's thrusters wane or felt like his reactions were even a tiny bit slower, he would dash behind Tsumugu. A nod passed between kamui, and Reiketsu passed him a tiny vial with a bundle of loose life-fibers. He snagged it, crushed it, and kept moving as Nekketsu absorbed it - not even pausing long enough for his flowing hair to stop whipping behind him. Tsumugu was a bit more

sparing with his life-fiber boosts, he was the one keeping count of how many they had left, after all. At least, he thought he was, but in the heat of the moment that rush of fresh adrenaline, the safety of seeing the world slow down just a bit more and Minazuki's attacks become more manageable was hard to resist. He knew they would run out. The only question was how soon.

For Reiketsu, there was one clear solution to their problems. Fire the secret weapon. *[But when? The formula works against it, Nekketsu's always too close! They won't have time to react!]*. She had seen the weapon test fire, and even a fraction of its power would surely kill Aikuro, especially at this range.

She was ready to fire it, all the pieces were arranged in order within the nowhere-space inside her and could be produced at a moment's notice. She didn't really understand how she moved things around in there herself (and imagined it looked quite horrifying in there) but having so much machinery ready to go made her feel... full, somehow. It only made her feel more urgently that she had to let it rip its way out, now!

They were nearing the Tsugaru strait, the boundary between Hokkaido and Honshu. There was only one ridgeline left between them and the lowlands, where a large city fanned out across the coast, visible in the dark only as little rectangular teeth chewing at the reflective surface of the water behind it. Reiketsu felt like she was deflating when she saw it. *[Not a city...]* She groaned. She was loath to fire the weapon within a major city and Tsumugu felt the same. It had been evacuated and gone totally dark, but that didn't mean the devastation would be anything less than catastrophic. So far only a few small towns and highways had been claimed by the fight in the mountains, keeping it that way felt important. It wasn't their moment.

They were in the valley before the final ridge. Minazuki was charging Aikuro, and Tsumugu sped to assist. He saw the two of them casting kaleidoscopic rays between the trees, then felt the tickle of wood being turned to sawdust as he crashed through towards them. He skidded up next to Aikuro, planted his feet on the ground and unloaded his revolver on Minazuki. She dodged all five shots this time and with only the tiniest adjustments to boot, but that bought enough time for Tsumugu's wing engines to fire. They spun up faster than any aircraft's engines could, so fast they glowed red hot, but the specially made alloys remained solid. Instead it was the leaf litter that was immolated as he surged forward, throwing gouts of fire into the forest. Tsumugu batted aside Minazuki's extended fingers with his shield and thrust at her, and when Minazuki parried his sword Aikuro zipped around behind her, tailor's dagger outstretched. But that too Minazuki blocked, and they hacked at each other repeatedly.

Minazuki seemed unphased by the whirlwind of violence and was easily capable of keeping up. She said, "For someone who claims to be fighting to save the world, you certainly are quite comfortable with destroying large parts of it, aren't you?" With an air of smugness that was sure to irritate Tsumugu. He didn't respond, except to shout louder and drive his swings all the harder. It still wasn't enough. He watched her dash back - too fast for him to follow - and then bounce back with a perfect fencing strike towards his heart. He managed to get his shield up in time, and the tip of her scissorblade striking its smooth surface produced a huge shockwave that ripped through the ground and sent him rocketing up the ridgeline. He cleared it and the ground fell away on the other side into the suburbs.

Tsumugu saw that as Minazuki lunged at him, Aikuro had grabbed her other arm at the wrist with the tailor's glove. For a moment she looked at him in consternation as the dampening field made her hand with its too-shiny skin go limp. Then he raised the tailor's dagger and shoved it at her chest. Dare to dream, for a moment Tsumugu thought it might go in. Instead, Minazuki

flailed her arm wildly, slamming Aikuro into the ground once, twice, dozens of times in short succession. All the topsoil was long since blasted away and now the rocks cracked into thick plates as he crashed into it. Then before Tsumugu knew it Aikuro's grip slipped and instead of slamming into the ground again he went hurtling into the air. He sailed past Tsumugu, the abruptness of it turning his shout into a sharp, "YIEEE!" Minazuki surged after him, eager to kill him as he tumbled head over heels through the air. Tsumugu took this scene in with a steely gaze, and then stopped and turned his wings over to their hover configuration. Reiketsu knew exactly what he was thinking.

*Now.*

*[What? Not now!]* Reiketsu protested. *[The formula's all wrong!]* But she saw what Tsumugu did. Sure, the positions were all wrong; Aikuro was much closer to them than Minazuki and would have only a split second to react. But he was less disoriented than he looked - keeping his eye on her, ready to defend himself. And she was focused only on him. *[I hope you're right about this!]*

"TAKE COVER!" *[TAKE COVER!]*

Aikuro and Nekketsu sprung to life. Thrusters flaring, they didn't hesitate and dove towards the ground just as instructed. They hit a suburban street headfirst, cracking the ground like an eggshell, and then vanished amidst a cloud of dust and rubble. Minazuki watched, perplexed. Then she heard a metallic whining noise like a blender and whirled around.

She only had a brief glimpse of Tsumugu's face, scowling defiantly, before the weapon encased him. It poured out from every one of Reiketsu's pockets, around his waist and on his back, in streams of metal that unfolded in a fractal pattern. Each was a row of segmented plates, gently curved, and as they unfolded they came together at perfectly machined seams with only the faintest sliding noise like well-honed swords. A perfect sphere, shining, woven through with Reiketsu's black threads which made it pulse with an active red light. Hundreds of tiny holes poked through it and even as the sphere was still coming together gun barrels were sliding through. Heavy caliber for a firearm but small compared to many of the cannons Reiketsu could deploy, there was plenty of space for them in their multitudes. And they slid into place at a shocking speed, to a human the whole process would have looked nearly instant because Reiketsu controlled it all – no gears or wires to slow everything down. Minazuki was left looking at a floating pincushion, a steel sea urchin that hovered without any obvious outside engines. In fact the engines, the firing mechanisms, and even the ammunition belts inside were not even fully within this dimension.

Whether Minazuki knew what she was looking at, whether the life-fibers had been peering into Tsumugu's lab and piped that information through to her or not, she didn't realize what it was until it was too late. Her eyes went wide and she dashed back, but *\*B-B-B-B-B-B-B-BOOM!\** all of the gun barrels fired in eight perfectly synchronized volleys mere milliseconds apart. She watched their payloads creep towards her, streaming through the air in neatly spaced little queues. Tiny missiles, each loaded with a dozen tiny submunitions. As one, they all hissed and popped off their mothers. The front two volleys had already passed Minazuki. The entire sky for hundreds of yards in every direction was a perfect lattice, twinkling little silver bombs all aligned in eight concentric globes.

He'd calculated the spacing perfectly. When they went off all at once, there was nowhere to run. Even to Minazuki, the synchronicity was... mesmerizing.

**\*KA-POW!\***

The synchronized explosion came as with a high pitched blast of resounding purity. A new sun momentarily flashed into existence, a perfect sphere of white-hot light that touched down to the surface where it obliterated houses, taking a huge, clean bite out of the ground below. Just as soon, the explosion devolved into a chaotic fireball, billowing with oily black smoke. Minazuki was sent hurtling away, trailing a thick comet tail of blood. And it was done.

Amidst the broken pipes and cables dotting the cratered ground, Aikuro shoved his way up from the earth. He took it all in with a few dazzled blinks, and then quickly leapt up to standing. The moment he did, sharp pains sprung up all over his body as if he'd been pepper-sprayed and he grunted.

*[Ow ow ow! That stings!]* Nekketsu instinctively flinched, and so did Aikuro. He spastically jumped back, waving his hands to swat away the invisible source, only to find that the air there was filled with the stuff too. They stopped. *[It's... hurting me! What on earth happened?]*

The air, they now saw, was packed with a soft snow of nearly microscopic threads like fiberglass. They glinted in the moonlight, but without their reflective quality they were nearly black. A deep blue-black. Aikuro started, realizing what the threads must have been. "It can't be!" he exclaimed.

Up above, Reiketsu sucked the weapon back up like trailing metal spaghetti. Tsumugu hovered there, shoulders hunched, looking winded. Aikuro swiftly flew up to him, occasionally angling Nekketsu's thrusters forward for just a moment to clear away the threads. They were everywhere, drifting slowly through the air, and while they left pinpricks of pain and the occasional thin red scratch mark, they clearly weren't moving fast enough to slice too deeply.

When he was alongside Tsumugu, Aikuro simply said, "Whoa. What... what was *that*?"

"The Hardened Life-Fiber Razorwire Aerosol Weapon," Tsumugu said. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead and he was breathing heavily – using the weapon had put tremendous strain on Reiketsu's powers, a burden he shared. "It's easy enough to make a hardened life-fiber ballistic with cross-cut potential, you know that," He motioned at Aikuro's bow. "But when facing a hybrid, scoring a hit is nearly impossible. They will simply move themselves somewhere the projectile is not. So, with this," He plucked some of the threads between two fingers, "We fill the entire battlefield with millions of tiny projectiles. Thousands of overlapping cross-cuts can be scored in a single shot. And there is no place where the projectiles are not."

"Wow... that's..." Aikuro was stunned. Not that it was at all surprising from Tsumugu, but through Nekketsu he could immediately feel just how dangerous the weapon really was. The feeling of invincibility that came with a Kamui – was *supposed* to come with Kamui – was just gone in that moment. *If someone learned about this, replicated it, and used it against Ryuko... it might be enough to kill her.* The thought of her, engulfed by the thing and sliced apart into ground meat before she even knew what was happening, it was just – *Oh, God.* "Fucked," Aikuro said with a shudder. "This is a fucked-up thing you've made."

Tsumugu nodded, not looking offended or chastised in the least but just resigned to that fact. "I wasn't sure I wanted to make it, myself. But given the possibility that *this* would happen, what choice did I have? And if I had the idea... it's better we have control of it than someone else."



Well, that was true enough. “So... is it over, then? Where is she?”

Tsumugu pointed over to the smoking crater Minazuki had made. Her aura was still there, but it rippled with powerful distress and pain. Was it dying? It might have been. They swiftly flew over to the crater, dropping down and walking up the overturned earth of the rim.

Minazuki was laying in the crater’s epicenter. Staring at the sky, mouth open in horror. It kept open and closing, gnashing teeth together to try to force out a word. “Ah... Ah...” Her arm spasmed as it clutched at the left side of her face, from which blood gushed uncontrollably. The entire left side of her body was bleeding, from her scalp down her shoulders and midriff and all the way to her calf. Thin red lines criss crossed her skin in the thousands, each weeping continuously. The elegant white gown – which had evidently been made of life-fibers as well – was torn to shreds. It wasn’t reforming itself. Her wounds weren’t closing.

“Ho...” Even Tsumugu was taken aback. The way she twisted in agony, in pain she had never expected to feel again, was so utterly inhuman. The blood stained her hair and tinted the rainbow lights, so half the crater fell into an infernal crimson glow. And her mouth, the lips pulled too far back. Now the similarities to Ragyo were all too plain. It sent a tremor of panic down his back. *No, she can’t still be alive!*

“Shit!” Aikuro yelled, “Looks like we’ll have to finish her-“

“Agh-Ah-AIIIEEEEYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” Aikuro was cut off as Minazuki howled a deafening screech. At first the noise of a young woman suffering such dreadful pain was piteous, but before long it has distorted into something unrecognizable. An alien noise, high and vaguely electronic, scraping at the edge of hearing as though intruding into their ears. Aikuro and Tsumugu both clapped their hands over their ears as a huge burst of hot wind washed over them from Minazuki. Her glow erupted to tenfold intensity. As if an invisible hand was clamping down on her writhing body she seized control of it and pulled herself limply up to standing. Her hand dropped to her side to reveal eyes that were fixed right on them. Right on Tsumugu.

“What did you do?” She growled, “WHAT DID YOU *DO!*” The light projecting from her was so bright, a dazzling mix of rainbow glow and crimson streaks, that it swallowed up everything behind her and cracked into the ground. Pieces of earth began to shake as she slowly lurched towards them. “My body... my *perfect* body,” She sounded as if she was nearly brought to tears by uttering the words, “You’ve *ruined* it!” The blood continued to run off her, soaking into her dress. And the dress lapped it up, staining further and further as the blood ran into its every corner, every stray piece of lace. [*That must be part of her;*] Reiketsu thought, [*It can’t be a kamui. If it were, the amount of power it’s absorbing would be immense!*]

“Tsumugu Kinagase,” Minazuki intoned in a voice that had nothing of her usual frivolity, “You will *suffer* for this!” Her dress was entirely red now, a gloriously pure crimson, as if it had always been that color. But it would not regenerate any longer. She began to lift off the ground. Her scissor blade, dribbling with blood, was back in her hand. “I swear, you will know pain like you have never imagined before you die!”

Tsumugu and Aikuro raised their weapons. “Please tell me you’ve got another one of those up your sleeve!”



# Part Six of the Great Battle for the Future

## Chapter Notes

I have no idea why it doesn't keep my paragraph indents. Does this look bad? Let me know if so.

October 2068

~~~~~

2:17 am

~~~~~

Uzu was weighed down by worries. Not that anyone could tell, he was cutting through the REVOCS army with his usual ease. Although it wasn't like there was anyone around to tell, the army and now all of the Kamui Corps had left. It was him against the entire tide of them with only Seijitsu to keep him company. That was the problem.

He knew he could hold up his end, in fact REVOCS was making it easy for him because in their frenzied zeal they had decided to simply run their ships aground and leap to shore. With so much wreckage choking the seawall, ships barging in had to fan out to reach a free space and that gave Uzu plenty of time to catch them and scuttle them with a few powerful slashes. Shockwaves rippled through ships, crumpling them like tinfoil before they exploded from within, but Uzu wasn't really watching that. He wasn't paying much attention to the hordes that rushed at him either. And while that made him no less effective, if someone knew him well they would see how uncreative he was being. His heart just wasn't in it.

*Everyone had better be okay.* His thoughts wandered repeatedly, magnetically drawn to Ryuko. Trying to reassure himself meant pulling his focus back over everyone else, and there wasn't much reassuring there. *Mako, and Rei, out there on their own. Minazuki wouldn't chase after them, would she? And Houka, with his eye...* that made his stomach lurch, it didn't feel real. *Aikuro and Tsumugu, at least, are probably still alive right? They had better be.* He didn't even know that Nonon was injured, or else he would have been even more concerned. And while Uzu knew that in this situation no news was good news, reviewing everyone's current conditions ensured he was jumpily awaiting a ping from his earpiece any moment. From Tokyo back to Hokkaido, they were all strung out in disarray – scared, hurt, exhausted, or all three at once. There was nothing he could do about it.

And then there was Ira.

Ira hadn't moved since he had cut his arm off. A shadow against a black sky, he was nearly invisible except for the glowing orange stump where molten metal still dribbled and steamed. Tekketsu's aura was stable, sharpened by pain but not fading. But that could change at any moment.

*Come on, move already!* Uzu thought. More than any of the others, Ira was the one that tempted Uzu to back down from the fight. It would be so easy to fly over there. *"You good, bro?"* He'd ask, and he could imagine the exact tone of voice he would say it in. Ira sure didn't seem to be rousing himself on his own, so as the minutes crept on it only seemed more necessary. It was almost magnetic, and despite himself he was curious. As many times as he'd seen Ryuko shrug off the removal of an arm, a leg, even her head (hell, he'd caused plenty of those himself since she let the others spar with live blades against her), that losing a limb that wasn't even part of his real body was so debilitating to Ira was shockingly visceral. *Oh right, we're not like her,* He had realized, *In spite of our power we can still be hurt.* It made him worry that Ira might not wind up totally fine when he powered down, which was what Uzu would normally have assumed just because that was how these things usually went. *But what do I know? Nothing like this has ever happened before.*

But he had his duty. He kept his discipline. He did not back down from REVOCS, even for a moment. Keeping them from making a landing was his job and no matter what he wanted to do, withdrawing for even a few minutes would result in failure. Uzu knew in the abstract what would happen if he did that – roving warbands ransacking city and countryside, and if they found any of the underground bunkers they would massacre the people. But it was Seijitsu to whom that hit home the most. She was horrified by the thought that someone might die just hours before Ryuko killed Minazuki (and she had no doubt that she would) and never know how close to the end they'd come. That was so *unbelievably* unjust she couldn't take it! So there was no way Uzu could turn his back on REVOCS.

But they both sure wished they could. These thoughts kept going round in circles in their heads with nothing changing for what felt like forever until Seijitsu suddenly gasped.

*[Uzu, look!]* Though in fact it was her who did the looking, swiveling her eyes around in his shoulder spikes. Ira was stirring. His head, which had been rocked back to stare at the sky, tilted forward with a repetitive grinding motion. Seijitsu thought he seemed to be steeling himself for something, and she was right. He and Tekketsu had decided to attempt something they weren't sure was possible.

The molten orange glow that had lit up the seams in the *Kyojin* form's skin when Ira battled Minazuki flared back to life. The noise of grinding, of tectonic shifting, continued to rumble low and dull across the blasted landscape. Before Seijitsu's eyes, the gigantic *Kyojin* form began to shift. Bulges and pits rose and fell under its surface, stretching and squeezing Ira's shape in slow pulsations. Seijitsu watched with awe and yet with a feeling almost like revulsion. If this had been his real body, the swirling lumps would have looked like nothing less than a horde of some kind of hideous alien parasite writing away just beneath the skin.

Ira gritted his teeth in a mix of pain and concentration, though the constant lengthening and scrunching of his face contorted his expression like a funhouse mirror. His hot-coal eyes were fixated on the stump of his arm. It began to glow brighter. The liquid insides of his living stone body were rearranging, gathering themselves up and accreting onto the end of the stump. They ran smooth and thick like lava, layer over layer, gradually extending outward and taking shape. Biceps, elbow, forearms, wrist, palm, and finally fingers. A new arm, still ablaze and flowing but gradually cooling, was taking form. The movements felt glacial to Seijitsu due mostly to her anticipation, but it was a remarkably quick process and in just a few minutes it was over. The seams along his body clicked back together as one with a resonant *\*THOOM!\**, and he gave his new arm an experimental flex.

He felt profoundly settled. Just knowing the loss wasn't permanent put his mind at ease and all of a sudden he felt as if he could think clearly once again. *It hasn't all gone my way though* , He thought as he looked at the remains of his old arm, which lay cold and inert on the ground. *There's no doubt about it, I've become shorter.* He'd lost a full head height from his original lofty stature, though he still towered at the height of a skyscraper. *And it still doesn't feel... quite right.* He curled his fingers again, trying to put words to the sensation.

The new arm wasn't numb, exactly. In fact, that was the problem. It felt wrong that he *could* feel it, as acutely as if it had been the original. Even though seemingly it was identical, it there was an indescribably sense of foreignness to it. *My body is not entirely the original, anymore. Is this how Ryuko feels when she regenerates?*

It was not. And Ira did not know it then, but this peculiar feeling was one that would stick with him after he returned to his real body, and indeed for the rest of his life. He would become used to jolting awake at night, startled by the existence of his own arm, and to having that disconcerting feeling interrupting his days. Indeed, in time it would be recognized as a new neurological condition, a sort of "reverse phantom limb" that only he had the dubious honor of experiencing.

Not that it mattered now. He set his face into a firm scowl as he stared across the dark plains at the shore where REVOC'S battlefleet still burned bright with cannon fire and Ultima Uniforms. His sword remained plunged partway into the earth, and he lifted it effortlessly though it now looked even more absurdly huge compared to his shrunken form. Uzu, still mid battle, grinned up at him as he strode over to shore.

"That's. What's. Up!" Uzu cheered at him, too caught up in exhilaration to come up with something more cogent. He kept on fighting until Ira had forded into the shallow sea and caught up with him, at which point he scooted up by Ira's shoulder and let the flyers chase him. As he effortlessly dismantled a *Medjay* and a supporting squad of One-Star flyers, he shouted, "Did you like, even know you could do that?"

"No," Ira answered as casually as he could under the circumstances. Explosions puffed around him in a smoky wreath, and solid shells skittered harmlessly off his shoulders. The heavy guns on the battleships had gratefully turned to fire on a target they could actually hit. **"I thought about my family's ironworks. The way the metal flows. And then I tried to picture it pouring into a mold in the shape of my arm. I wasn't sure it would *work* , but... that's usually how these things go."** Uzu nodded, it was true enough. Most of the time when the Kamui developed a new form, visualizing it was the first step. As if they were trying to work out if their idea was possible, draw it into existence. And the more fleshed out and detailed their mental image, the closer it came to becoming reality.

"So... you ready to fight then?" Uzu asked. Ira was glowering out, evidently deep in thought. It was a terrifying sight for the REVOCs cultists. A grand shadow with glowing eyes, flashes of a deeply lined stone face illuminated by the fiery light of innumerable explosions, all wreathed in smoke and underneath a sky dark enough to blend his silhouette together. Aboard their ships they quailed, and for the first time since Ryuko fled their assured victory seemed to be slipping away. Ira was not meant to get back up, not after Minazuki had defeated him. Instead, here he was again and as unbreakable as before, looking like nothing more than a great demon king.

But he wasn't actually looking at them. He was repeatedly flexing his hand, starting at it, trying to process the odd sense of wrongness to it. **"I'm fine."** He heaved his sword from his

shoulders, and wrapped both hands around its hilt. **“Let’s finish this quickly. I need to let Mako know I’m okay.”**

~~~~~

3:35 am

~~~~~

“RRRAAAAAA!” Minazuki shouted as she lunged at Tsumugu. He thought he was ready, but she moved with a fluid, ruthless rage that reminded him immediately of fighting Ryuko. And he realized that, even the very first time they had met, Ryuko had never really tried to kill him.

He raised his shield up to block just too slowly. The tip of Minazuki’s sword reached past it and sliced into his shoulder. She clicked her fingers together and the second blade scissored up, but it clanged off the shield’s smooth boss harmlessly. The force of the impact was brutal and nearly knocked Tsumugu off his feet, so he leapt with it and the two of them sailed off into the silver mists, trading blows and parries.

“You *FOOL!*” She railed, “You don’t even know what you’re *DOING!*” Aikuro plunged it between them at the earliest opportunity, giving Tsumugu some much needed breathing room. With a twist of his wings and a gout of superheated air he sped north, back the way they had come. Paying little mind to Aikuro, she immediately spun around and pursued him. Behind her, a veil of blood sizzled through the air and prevented Aikuro from landing a parting blow. “All those years fighting Ragyo’s ‘tyranny’, the contemptuous dismissal in her voice was obvious and only accented by how furiously she hacked at Tsumugu the second he caught up, “And now you let her daughter establish a tyranny a thousand times worse! Eternal dominion over the Earth!”

In another context Tsumugu might have thought these points were worth listening to if only to refute them. But from the enemy, they were nothing but lies. Instead, he triumphantly thought, *She’s so fixated on me, she’s forgotten all about going for Ryuko!* They were now dancing back through the forested hills of Hokkaido, the exact opposite of the way Minazuki meant to go. Past the craters and divots carved by their previous battles. Tsumugu was immediately grateful for Reiketsu’s prior thoroughness in boobytrapping the area. The moment Minazuki set her foot on the ground, a mine momentarily ripped the lower half of her body apart. It gave Tsumugu and Aikuro an opportunity to strike as one and momentarily they together were able to force her onto the defensive,

“You think she will let you be free? Hah!” Minazuki raged as they chained their attacks together – Tsumugu swinging his longsword in fearsome arcs that felled dozens of trees from the force alone, Aikuro rolling under or leaping above to stab at her face and chest with the tailors dagger and his bow’s tips. “Oh, she might keep the earth safe for a time – as her trophy! Anything that displeases her, anything she might wish, she can *force* people to bend with it. And there’s nothing any of you can do to stop her!” They pressed her as hard as they could, but even with a synchronized attack she still managed to parry deftly. When she slipped in a riposte, her arm swiped out faster than they could see with scissor blade snapping in a blur. If they were not skilled enough to anticipate each counterattack before it came, they would have been disemboweled.

Minazuki carried on, “The humans will not save themselves. Their only hope is that their futile resistance might shame her. But they won’t even *try* to resist; they will bow *willingly!* You’ve seen it yourselves! They already name her their god, after a thousand years what do you think will happen! And you,” Her face curdled into a contemptuous grin, “What do you think she will do

with *you*? Her family? More like her pets! What freedom do you think *you'll* have while she lives? After all, she's already made you do things that go against every moral fiber in your body, hasn't she?"

*Oh, that does it!* Tsumugu and Reiketsu were both at last provoked to rage. They pushed off the ground and fired their jets with tremendous force, leaving Aikuro trailing behind as they carried Minazuki crashing through tree after tree. Minazuki obviously referred to how they had accepted Ryuko's relationship with Satsuki, and even went so far as to offer her the cover story that she was Kinue Kinagase's daughter.

*[Don't leave us behind like that!]* Nekketsu shouted as Aikuro raced behind, a blur zipping through the forest nimbly.

*[Sorry! But – every moral fiber?]* Reiketsu spat, *[The only moral thing to do was show them mercy! They both suffered enough from the curse of their family without us making it worse, not that it was easy to let it go! Not that she'd – Rrrgh!]* Tsumugu made a parallel grunt of rage as he was spurred on to swing and stab with even greater fury, *[Not that she'd ever understand that!]*

At last, Tsumugu found an opening. Minazuki tried to throw in a counter-strike, but he saw the way her elbow cocked back – her tell – and spurred Reiketsu's thrusters for one last burst. He plunged past her with his sword held to his side, and as the scissor blade sliced past his ear it plunged into her chest down to the hilt. She grunted in shock and a fountain of dark, glistening blood splashed across Tsumugu's arm. It hissed and steamed as it hit the air and he realized too late it really was boiling hot. His howl of rage became one of shock as the blood soaked his arm. Usually, Kamui were resistant to heat and cold and their wearers could survive raging fires and Antarctic storms with equal ambivalence. But somehow, this time, all that blood passed right through Reiketsu's barrier and every inch of bare skin on Tsumugu's arm stung with fresh burns.

He leapt back and hissed through clenched teeth. Then he shouted, "Aikuro!"

"I see it!" Aikuro dashed in between him and Minazuki. He had been fighting with the tailor's dagger in one hand and his bow in the other, using it like a staff. Now he slid his hand down to one end, right above the blade on the tip. Together its two limbs were nearly the length of his body. So when he managed to slip a few slices past her guard the splash of blood didn't reach him.

Tsumugu glanced down at his right arm, which was rapidly becoming red and raw. "So, you want to bring me pain, huh?" He shouted. His voice cracked a bit, as despite his best mental discipline he thought, *Crap, on the other hand she's so focused on me, I don't have the choice to back down anymore.* The squeezing pressure of fear bore down on his mind suddenly, *This isn't buying time anymore. This is kill her or die! And my best hope of doing that didn't work the first time!* But just because he felt that fear didn't mean he would let it beat him down. "Then I'll show you I'm not afraid to dish it on myself! Reiketsu!"

A cloud of white powder abruptly vented from Tsumugu's belt. High powered burn salves, painkillers, and disinfectants mixed into a broth that washed over his skin and prompted a burst of pain far beyond that of the burns. "GYAAH!" Tsumugu screamed, momentarily dropping his gun to clutch at his forearm. But after just a moment the pain cooled into a comfortable numbness. And with it, Tsumugu had his cool back too. He plunged back into combat. But now, once again, both he and Reiketsu were thinking with a quiet desperation about how to unleash their secret weapon as soon as possible.

He would get his chance several minutes later (in Kamui battle terms a marathon bout that saw a large portion of their spare life-fiber capsules used). Minazuki made a move to disengage from the two of them briefly. She whipped her bloody fingers around in a whirlwind and both Aikuro and Tsumugu leapt back to avoid getting snagged. A half-remembered instinct guided Tsumugu to jump and saved him, for he was an instant too slow. A finger would have grabbed his ankle, had he not jumped right over an autonomous sentry gun buried in the leaf litter. Minazuki's finger seized the barrel instead, reeling it back up like a fish, and then the gun immediately began firing in Minazuki's face, carving into her and bouncing all around with the force of its recoil. Tsumugu landed and fired off his pistol as she looked at the turret in bemusement, and her head burst like a balloon. Aikuro lunged in then and jammed his bow between her ribs, yelling, "YAH!" as he lifted her off the ground. But before he could plunge the tailor's dagger in and finish her – boiling blood be damned - he saw her sword lifting high above her head, and sprung back just in time to avoid a savage downward swing. As it was the crack of the shockwave it made raced across the mountains and the entire hillside Aikuro landed on exploded. He vanished amidst a cloud of dust and rubble.

*[Another chance!]* Reiketsu exclaimed. Aikuro was buried under solid rock for the moment, so the coast was clear to let loose with the Razorwire Aerosol Weapon again. Tsumugu leapt into the air without hesitation she deployed the second round (she had indeed come prepared to fire the weapon repeatedly). Tsumugu allowed himself a modicum of hope. Minazuki was scowling contemptuously at him from the forest floor less than one hundred feet below. At this range, there would be nothing left of her but a red smear.

Just as before, the spherical firing chamber slammed shut around Tsumugu and the gun barrels deployed with impossible-seeming speed and precision. He had once last glimpse of her as it closed, and then the staggered thuds of the guns firing and the single, synchronized explosion of all the tiny charges hit him. Everything shook for just a moment, and then Reiketsu eagerly began to disassemble the weapon. *[That'll do i-]*

She was rudely interrupted by the sight of Minazuki rushing up at them.

*How!* Was all Tsumugu had time to think. He couldn't believe what he was seeing, it was impossible! Minazuki aimed for his shoulder again, meaning to cut his arm off and cripple him. Her promise to deliver him pain before death was deadly serious. It all would have been over right then, if Aikuro had not burst from the rubble and reacted immediately. He dropped the tailor's dagger and seized a huge rock boulder several times bigger than him. But it wasn't Minazuki he threw it at – she would have probably dodged. Instead, he pitched it directly at Tsumugu, striking him like a runaway train and knocking him out of the way. The partially disassembled secret weapon came spinning apart around him as he fell to the ground, but he landed on his feet. Minazuki, seemingly a bit miffed by this turn of events, dashed backwards and landed on the ground.

"Shit!" Aikuro raced over to Tsumugu's side, "Did I break it?"

"No, no no *NO!*" Tsumugu gasped, "She *can't* have already learned to counter it! All that work!" He whipped his head around, trying to spot a hole or crater she could have hid in. Nothing. "*HOW!*"

"I didn't see..." Aikuro said.

*[From her aura she stayed in the same spot,]* Nekketsu offered, not like it helped any.



Tsumugu straightened his back, dropping the broken remains of the weapon's shell to the ground around him. Aikuro glanced at it in alarm. Even broken, it was shockingly intricate and in other circumstances he might have wanted to hide it so that spies from REVOCS or another country couldn't find and copy it. At the moment though all he had to say was, "Is the RAW bomb ruined?"

"The what?"

"The weapon."

"Oh. It's fine. We have spares." Minazuki was staring them down, trying to spot a weakness in their defenses. Back-to-back, they gave her as little opening as they could, but they knew from experience she could burst forward with no warning.

"So," Aikuro said, recovering his composure a bit. "Her blood hurts, somehow, and she got past the RAW bomb somehow."

*[The what?]* Reiketsu asked.

*[That's what it spells!]* Nekketsu replied.

*[... I don't like that!]*

*[Well tough! Need I remind you of a certain Nudist Beach vehicle that – Uh-oh, heads up!]* Minazuki was charging back at them again. She swung for the right side of Aikuro's head, closer to Tsumugu, to drive a wedge between them. Suddenly inspiration struck Aikuro. He threw his weapons to the ground and then slid up closer to Tsumugu. At the last second, he leaned back and the scissor blade whizzed past his head, snipping off the tips of his hair as it went. He snapped his arms up and caught her sword arm in a vicious armbar. Without hesitation he bent her elbow down and snapped it. Years of training with Ryuko had taught him that though a hybrid's body was tougher than a human's, the raw strength of a Kamui could tear it apart easily. Her elbow snapped back unnaturally the moment he let it go, but that was time enough.

Aikuro sidled around behind Minazuki and she whirled around, and without hesitation he raised the Tailor's Glove and grabbed her free hand with it. He interlocked his fingers with hers and the blood that trickled from them sizzled on the glove's surface. Minazuki's lips rose into an astonished snarl as she realized that the dampening effect of the Tailor's Glove was preventing her fingers from stretching to strangle him. "W-what the!"

"Don't break the skin!" Aikuro called out to Tsumugu. Tsumugu nodded and jumped in, blasting through what was left of the forests and attempting to smash Minazuki in the head with the boss of his shield. She blocked that with the flat surface of her sword, producing a noise like a tuning fork and a shockwave that blasted away the last few trees from the general area. She pushed Tsumugu off with a huge heave and was about to shake Aikuro off when he responded first. He leapt back, skipping off the rubble at lightning speed and pulling her with him. She tried to stab him repeatedly as they went but he stayed one step ahead, fending her off with his free hand and feet and zipping from side to side or even behind her to keep her off balance. They looked like nothing more than dance partners, stomping out a deranged waltz at timelapse speeds.

*Wow, he's learned all throughout this fight! Tsumugu thought, I thought Minazuki would throw him like last time, but he's the one controlling their momentum now.* It gave Tsumugu a rush of confidence. Far from giving up, Aikuro had learned and adjusted at each stage. He had nearly

been strangled by Minazuki's extending fingers at first, then hurled around the first time he tried to grab her with the Tailor's Glove. *He's completely changed his strategy from how he began,* Tsumugu realized, "And we should too!"

Arcing over Aikuro and Minazuki like a comet, Tsumugu dropped onto the hillside above them in a nimbus of jet-engine afterburn. "Aikuro! Left!" He barked, and Reiketsu began deploying the RAW Bomb once again. Only this time, she only projected half of it, a hemisphere obscuring the right side of Tsumugu's body. Aikuro immediately understood, vaulting up towards him in a zigzag pattern, Minazuki in tow. She was still trying to break his grip, and she raged, "GET OFF YOU VERMIN!" She realized what was happening too late. Aikuro dragged her over to Tsumugu's right, directly into the line of fire, and she vaulted over her, releasing her hand just in time to land to Tsumugu's side and in the clear. Her eyes went wide for just an instant before the shooting began.

Tsumugu and Aikuro both shut their eyes to prevent the flash of the explosion from blinding them, but their kamui had no such problems and kept their eyes open. They had been hoping to confirm the kill, but instead they were shocked to see exactly how Minazuki had escaped the RAW Bomb. Their humans watched with them, seeing what the kamui saw in their mind's eye like memories.

Minazuki was there, tiny submunitions pelting her skin as the eight volleys of tiny missiles released, and then all of a sudden something changed about her. She seemed to have no depth, and the light from the muzzle flashes fell evenly on skin and hair and her bloody dress. And then she rotated, and seemed to vanish. Her entire body was flattened, thinner than paper, thinner than anything except a life-fiber could ever hope to be. Just the faintest reflection of her edge was visible, curving into a intricate looping shape, and then the submunitions exploded. That was too bright for even the kamui, but they had seen enough to know that none of the hardened life-fiber razorwire would hit something so vanishingly, infinitesimally thin.

Blink and you'd miss it, the entire thing was over before an ordinary human would even have seen it. Minazuki popped back to normal as though nothing had happened and charged right at Tsumugu once again. He snapped into action and leapt back, shouting to Aikuro what they had just seen. "She went flat!"

"Amazing! I think I've seen Nui move like that before, I had no idea she was capable of that!" Aikuro stayed close, and the two of them flew further into the mountains, to an area they had passed through before but which was relatively unspoiled. Their battle, two RAW Bomb detonations, and the collapsing hill that Aikuro had briefly been buried in had left their previous battleground looking more like the surface of the moon than the typical Hokkaido mountains. At least where they were headed was where Tsumugu had merely firebombed everything, and charred tree trunks and dancing embers clung to the blackened ridgelines.

Tsumugu nodded, "Like the other hybrids, she does not exist entirely in this reality." They landed and braced for Minazuki's arrival.

*[The question is,]* Reiketsu said, *[Can we somehow force her to stay in her normal shape while we fire the RAW Bomb.]* None of them had any idea how they could do something like that, but the very thought that there was a way gave them a rush of confidence.

They held their ground as Minazuki descended on them. Her rainbow light cast the scorched landscape into stark relief, dark earth and darker shadows stretching away into the distance. Outwardly she betrayed no sign of any feeling except the towering rage she now reserved for

Tsumugu and Reiketsu. She was proud beyond all reason of the supreme power of her alien mind. It made her the superior of any living being, even Ryuko – though only because Ryuko didn't fully know how to control it, not that Minazuki would tell her. But after witnessing the speed with which these two bonded kamui and their human other halves had figured out her trick, an unpleasant doubt trickled in. These primitives might not be so far behind as she had thought.

~~~~~

4:12 am

~~~~~

Tsumugu and Aikuro and their kamui fought on as long as they were possibly able. Across the ranges and valleys, blowing apart towns, industrial plants, and highways that fell into their path, they dueled Minazuki. Before Reiketsu unveiled the RAW Bomb, they had hacked at her with wild abandon. But now that sort of unplanned violence would only soak them in her boiling blood, and so eventually they abandoned using their weapons at all. Tsumugu was better with his hands anyway. They rushed in past her sword, swatting it aside and laying into her with dozens of punches and kicks, all to unbalance her so the other could slip around the side and lock her arm up. They tried over and over again to pin her for long enough for Tsumugu to deploy and fire the RAW Bomb.

Getting Minazuki to stay solid turned out to be as hard as they could have imagined. The first thing they tried was having Aikuro armbar her and then hide behind her as Tsumugu fired. The moment he'd pinned her he rocked back and slammed his back into the forest floor so the blasts couldn't hit him from the sides. But she immediately went thin in his grasp just as Tsumugu vaulted over them, and after a moment where they stared at each other in wide-eyed astonishment they both jumped back to avoid her counterattack.

Next, Tsumugu tried pinning her down himself. He baited out a lash of her extendable fingers and Aikuro caught them with the Tailor's Glove. Nekketsu fired her thrusters to counter Minazuki's efforts to swing him around and they were immobile, her standing on the forest floor and him hovering above. Tsumugu zoomed in and dropped to the ground, sliding swiftly into her reach. She stabbed at him, but he'd come to recognize her strikes and managed to duck just under it, then snaked his arm up and around her sword arm. He jacked up her elbow and broke it, keeping the pressure on so it couldn't heal. Then, Nekketsu deployed just a single gun mounted on Tsumugu's shoulder, pointed right at her face. She grimaced – they were learning much too fast for her liking – but then right before Tsumugu's eyes her head vanished. It folded in on itself like it wasn't even there, leaving on the stump of her neck as glistening twist like the stem of a wine glass. The gun fired and predictably it sailed right through, obliterating a few trees.

And so it went. Time and again, they seemed to just manage to trap her but she desperately wormed out or bent her body in this new, unnatural way to avoid the blow. Still, she had to fight more cautiously too. Tsumugu expended several RAW Bombs to save either his or Aikuro's life, simply blasting them at her when they were on the backfoot to create a momentary barrier while they recovered. They were learning more about her fighting style too, her vulnerabilities as well as her powers. She seemed most comfortable fighting with feet on the ground, even though she didn't need it. She could rocket across the sky at astonishing speeds or zip between the trees with unerring agility (or go right through trees without any trouble) but if a bout of combat went on for more than a couple blows, she always wanted to be on the ground where her footwork let her pivot and spin to deal with both threats. So they tried to keep her in the air as much as possible. And she

didn't do well using both her sword and extending fingers at once. *She spent quite a while without an arm*, Tsumugu reflected, *did she get too used to fighting one-handed?* That created openings they could exploit, sometimes to strike at her but all too often just to get away.

Aikuro was about to try to grab her with the Tailor's Glove again, when he felt Nekketsu's thruster's sputter. *[Not good!]* She quickly conveyed, *[I'm running out of energy again!]* So was he. No amount of Nudist Beach training had prepared him for this. He reacted quickly, and instead of grabbing her, he swung around and kicked Minazuki in the chest with both feet. She went flying away over the ridges. Then Aikuro dropped gracefully to the ground. But the moment he did he groaned as he felt a horrible weakness in his legs. Sore and past exhausted, he could barely lift them and collapsed to one knee within moments of trying. "Shit!"

Tsumugu quickly arrived to see what the problem was. He dropped down next to Aikuro, tamping out the afterburn from his wings. "Hey man," Aikuro said, sounding weaker than he wanted to, "I need another life-fiber boost."

"I hate to say it," Tsumugu said, "But we're out."

A chill ran through Aikuro and Nekketsu as panic set in, "Out! But--"

*[Oh no!]* Nekketsu gasped. *[But we... we can't fight on any more!]* It was shameful to say it, but it was the truth. Nekketsu's power was ebbing, even her barrier flickered.

Tsumugu's face was grim, "We're not too far behind you." He reached into one of his pouches and drew his sword, which he had shoved into the nowhere space at full size rather than shrinking it. Taking a guard stance over Aikuro, he said, "I'm sorry."

"Do you... at least have another RAW Bomb?" Aikuro asked.

"Only one. And at this point, I've realized there's only one guaranteed way to hit her with it." Aikuro didn't say anything. "We'll have to detonate it right as she kills us."

Aikuro sighed, "I was afraid you'd say that." Tsumugu deployed the half-shell on his left, which wasn't facing Aikuro. But he was ready to drop the whole thing.

"There's still time, run," Tsumugu said. It sounded like a command. But even if he had been physically able, Aikuro would not have moved a muscle. A dark and horrible feeling of fatalism had come over him as he realized that if this was how it had to be, he couldn't leave Tsumugu now.

For a moment, nothing happened. They had landed in a relatively untouched clearing among pine forests and Aikuro had kicked Minazuki quite far. Her rainbow glow was just visible peeking through the trees. Was she coming? Had she heard their plan? It wasn't impossible. Would she give up and go after Ryuko. They could feel their racing heartbeats, and their Kamui radiating an exhilarating terror as they braced for whatever happened next.

*[I – I don't want to die!]* Nekketsu whimpered, at last unable to take it, *[Oh, Mother, I don't want to die!]*

Reiketsu was equally terrified, but she couldn't let Nekketsu endure that terror without some comfort. *[It's okay,]* She murmured softly *[It'll be okay. We-we'll save her. We'll save her, and the little baby. We'll make sure there's a future for our kind.]*

*[Do you... do you think we'll go where Senketsu is? Do you think Mother will come to visit us?]*

*[Maybe. Maybe, but...]* Reiketsu couldn't manage the next part. Wherever they went, they'd go without their wearers. Nekketsu knew it too.

She began to weep. Senketsu had, from time to time, displayed that most human of emotions as water inexplicably pooled around his big yellow eyes. Now the same happened to Nekketsu and she squealed, *[Aikuro! Aikuro! Aikuro I-I'm sorry! If I was only stronger, if I was only stronger we-]*

"It's okay," Aikuro said, though he couldn't stop a few tears from rolling down his cheeks too, "This is what we nudists we trained to do, from the very beginning. We've always known nobody would come to save us."

"In heaven's stead," Tsumugu intoned. He allowed himself only a single loud sniff. "Aikuro... I never told anyone this, but –," He had trouble squeezing the words out then and made a sorry little grunt.

"-I get it, you don't have to explain it to me," Aikuro smiled. *Even to the end, what a brick wall he is* , "You were like a brother to me too. It's been... good."

"N-no, not that," Tsumugu seemed to become only more awkward and his eyes darted away, "Though it's true. It's, well, Aoi. My wife and, uh, and I. We're going to have a baby."

Aikuro looked up at him, his smile broadened into joy, "Hey! Wha – that's great! When did you find out?"

"Just a few weeks ago. I didn't know how to tell anyone, but now..." Tsumugu trailed off again.

Aikuro's heart broke a little more then, if that was possible. *If we die now*, He realized, *He'll never see them!* He reached up and took Tsumugu's hand. Tsumugu clenched it back, far more glad for the human touch than he would ever admit. "Don't give up," Aikuro said, suddenly overwhelmed by the need for Tsumugu to survive. Maybe, maybe if he fired at just the right time Minazuki would be shredded just before she landed the killing blow. *Or I could...*

He tried to get to his feet. His legs shook, and a cramp raced up his calf. *No good. Then I'll just have to spring up from here.* He looked to Minazuki's light. To him it seemed to be coming closer. *So damn slow! What is she doing!* He prepared to leap the moment he saw her.

"There's one thing I'll regret, if I die here," Tsumugu said, voice steady. "Aoi and I hadn't decided if we would have them hybridized. But I have my answer now and I won't be able to tell her."

The look in Tsumugu's eyes wasn't fear or grim resignation. Rage. Spiteful defiance. When it came down to it, even all these years after the life-fibers took Kinue, death was nothing in the face of that. "You're going to do it!" He realized, "You're sure?"

One firm nod. "Look at this. Look at what we're facing," No doubt about it now, Minazuki was drawing closer. She might even have been walking through the forest. "They'll never stop coming. Ryuko knows. She knows the entire universe is against us now. We'll never be safe, especially not someone so close to Ryuko. And bringing someone into the world unable to defend themselves? That is one thing I will **not** do."

Aikuro had known Tsumugu nearly as long as he hadn't by now. But he was still blown away by the resolve inside of him. *Now that*, he thought, *is a true soldier*. "Then, you're not afraid of what Minazuki said? That Ryuko might turn out to be a tyrant? I mean, we've all thought it."

"If she was," Tsumugu looked at Aikuro, piercingly serious, "Do you think you could stop her?"

"Heck, *no* !" Aikuro chuckled and shook his head, "No chance! I love her, more fool me. I couldn't do it anymore than I could kill my own mother." After a moment, he said, "That... doesn't really answer my question."

"... I couldn't either," Tsumugu said. "You're right."

They watched Minazuki approach and Aikuro offered, "But... I don't think it will come to that. At Honnouji, I gave her every reason to hate me. I tried to provoke her every chance I got. She knew if she really wanted to hurt me or worse, I was totally helpless against it. And she never did," He smiled wistfully, "That's the kind of person she is."

"Hmm," Tsumugu nodded, "I don't know. I don't know what the future holds. So long as we all live, she will be okay. After that, it only makes having more hybrids even more important. She will need people who remember her from before. You know her. I think without that, tyrant or not, the loneliness will drive her insane."

Aikuro hadn't thought of it like that. At once his heart went out to Ryuko, fighting to deliver a child who would either be with her for all eternity, or gone forever in mere moments. Not for the first time he wondered if immortality was the gift it seemed like. *The stakes are infinitely higher for her, with forever on the line.*

He gasped. Minazuki was there, drifting into view above the trees on the edge of the clearing. She was still dribbling blood, but in spite of all their efforts she looked no worse for the wear than that. The breath went out of Tsumugu too. Nobody spoke now as she drifted slowly down towards them. All they could do was wait to see what she did next. Tsumugu braced for impact, ready to fire. Aikuro and Nekketsu were ready to expend the last ounce of their energy to dive in between them.

"*I'll be back for you*," She said. And then she was gone, once again an angry rainbow comet streaking southward through the sky.

The four of them blinked. For a moment they held their positions, blood still running cold. It could be a trick. But her aura kept receding and the light vanished into the night. "Heh," A laugh escaped Tsumugu's lips. He couldn't keep his feet anymore and sunk down onto a knee. At first, he held himself up with his sword, but then it clattered down and he dropped down onto his belly. "Hahahahaha!" He felt giddy. "Oh thank god! Thank god!" Aikuro laughed too, and collapsed onto his back as the kamui powered down.

The night air was still once more. Somewhere in the distance, the fires Tsumugu had started were still burning and the scent of smoke and crackling roar were faint intrusions on an otherwise peaceful place. *We'll have to get moving soon*, Tsumugu thought, *the fire will spread*. But for the moment he couldn't stop himself from laughing with joy. "Ahahahahaha!" His shoulders shook with each convulsive chuckle. Eventually, when he and Aikuro had run out of breath and happy tears, he sat up. "So, what happens now?"

"Now?" Aikuro thought and then said, "Now It's all up to Nonon."



# Part Seven of the Great Battle for the Future

## Chapter Summary

I think I at one point said I thought I could fit the contents of the last 7 chapters (and what comes next) into one chapter. I was deeply mistaken but hey there you go.

## Chapter Notes

UPDATE: Yes, the next chapter is in progress. It's gonna be long. I'm not splitting things up for Mataro's fight with Minazuki. So please be patient, thanks!

October 2068

~~~~~

4:20 am

~~~~~

There was a type of pain that Ryuko could still feel. A sort of pain without pain, a sickening, nauseous feeling. The awareness of surgical tools deftly working inside her belly was agonizing, probably all the more so because without pain she was deeply aware of every motion. It was all far too squishy, and to make matters worse she needed to focus on it in order to keep her healing power at bay. She had a grotesquely detailed picture of exactly what was happening in her mind and it sent her spine crawling. Resisting the urge to thrash around took every ounce of her willpower; even a twitch could put Nozomi's fragile life in peril. She was strapped to the gurney, but fabric and velcro were really only symbolic to her and she could have ripped them apart with ease. All Ryuko could do was lay there, stark still, staring at the glowing ring of the surgical light hanging above her, and try not to even breathe.

It was a living hell.

And the blood... It spilled out in endless torrents and had long since soaked the gurney, the sheets, the wall, part of the ceiling and all of the floor. Satsuki, sitting at Ryuko's side, had given up lifting her feet above it, and let the blood lap around the soles of her shoes on its way to the drain along the wall. Izanami's surgical apparatus was dyed solid red too but fortunately it operated just fine like that. It hunched over Ryuko, a smooth outer casing that had started out a clinical white with a large aperture from which various tools on many-jointed robotic limbs extended. Ryuko hated the sight of it, from her perspective it seemed like a hooded apparition, a grim reaper reaching out with cold, skeletal fingers.



~"You're doing great Ryuko!"~ Izanami cooed. ~"I need to expand the incision on both sides now, okay?"~. Ryuko only answered with a strained sob. Izanami displayed her animated avatar on a screen to Ryuko's left, across from Satsuki. Aside from them the little pop-up surgical room was empty. Shiro had recused himself, both because he was worried that his presence would be a distraction and also because he himself couldn't bear to watch. He busied himself with setting up the hybridization device, and when that was done went over to Houka's bed and laid down next to him. Nonon had come in to report when Minazuki had broken free from Ira and Aikuro and Tsumugu chased after her, but the very moment she took in the scene Ryuko watched in real time as the blood drained from her slack-jawed face. After that she refused to enter again and Ryuko was pretty sure she heard her crying outside.

~"Satsuki, more water?"~ Izanami then asked her. Satsuki shook her head weakly, but a cup was provided anyway. Satsuki was not much better off than Ryuko. With only Ryuko at her side, she couldn't – wouldn't – hide her weakness anymore. She passed out as soon as Izanami made the first incision. After a few minutes slumped in her chair she had fluttered back to life, however, and since then had gradually gotten her resolve back. She was shockingly pale, trembling, and had buried her face in Ryuko's hair since she couldn't bear to watch. And in spite of that she stayed, and the sheer resolve of that was so... beautiful to Ryuko it gave her the strength to go on. Challenged her to endure. Of course, Satsuki felt the same way and watching Ryuko go through hell only made her all the more certain she had to be here with her. They held hands in a white-knuckled death grip, and yet somehow it was Satsuki who squeezed harder.

"It'll be okay," She murmured into Ryuko's hair, "It'll be over soon, and then it will be just a bad dream. It's just a bad dream." In the back of her mind Ryuko adored the innocent simplicity of that, and it was what Satsuki herself needed to hear.

But there was something else, something far more bloody and savage, that Ryuko needed to keep her sane right then. Her fist. Minazuki's face. Over and over and over and over again. That was what came at the end of this. It was the only thing that mattered.

Mataro opened the door cautiously, but the two of them both jumped as if he'd ripped it from the hinges. "I, um..." Whatever he was going to say died in his throat as he took in the scene. All he could make was a strangled noise as he fought down bile. *Exactly like Nonon did*, Ryuko thought distantly. Mataro felt like he could barely stand, his face and arms went numb and for a moment he couldn't even look away. Wakaiketsu was buffeted by roiling waves of rage and dread emanating from Ryuko. The usual solar warmth of her enormous aura was gone, she was a cold, dead star. *No, no I can't tell them! I need to leave!* He managed with great effort to enter the room fully, and to tear his gaze away from the surgery and towards Satsuki's expectant eyes. Nonon was right not to come back in here. And yet, without really meaning to, he caved to Satsuki's authority. "She's coming! Aikuro and Tsumugu they-they-"

"Ah-AGH!" Ryuko tried to respond but to her horror and mortification all that came out was a shrill scream. Panic seized her, and for a second her back bucked and she felt... things. Things shifting inside her in a way no human body could possibly be prepared for. Immediately an alarm chimed on Izanami's surgical apparatus and its hands began to work overtime in a blur, dozens of new ones with soft manipulatory palps deploying in a mere second.

"Ryuko!"

"Ryuko!"

[Ryuko!]

~"Hold still damnnit!"~ Immediately everyone was shouting at once. Mataro started towards her and Satsuki threw herself over Ryuko's face and chest, but more arms from Izanami waved them both off.

"Izanami?" Satsuki gasped, asking a desperate question with that single word.

~"It's fine!"~ Izanami stayed level headed and grimly focused where the humans couldn't, ~"I've got this. But she needs to Hold. Still!"~

That command cut through Ryuko's panic. For a moment she had lost herself to despair, certain that just that one twitch was the end of it all. An eternity alone for an instantaneous loss of control. That was too much to bear. But she could feel everything, and she knew that Izanami was right. *It's fine. She said it was, and it is. It's fine!* She repeated to herself until she could believe it. It took her a few seconds to get her body back under control and her breathing to something like normal. She looked at Mataro for the first time then. It was so obvious he wasn't prepared for this and, *god, look at him. He's just a boy!* It took a herculean force of will but she managed to crack a kind of apologetic smile and weakly say, "H-hey."

A bad move, because maybe it was the reminder that it was really her on the operating table that meant he couldn't hold back tears. "Sh-shut up!" At that moment he did sound really quite young, "You can't go 'n act all cool now, you crazy bitch." And yet at that moment his admiration for her had hit an all time high. *There's no-one like her. Not a one.*

*I'm going to make sure she makes it through this.* That was a conviction he and Wakaiketsu shared.

"Mataro," Satsuki said evenly, "The others. Aikuro and Tsumugu. They're alive?"

"Alive? Yes, yes they're alive," Mataro was brought back to why he was here in the first place, "But they can't fight on any longer. They wounded her, but not nearly enough. And now she's coming here. We probably have... fifteen, twenty minutes."

SAtsuki nodded, "Then the three of you will mount the final defense?"

"Outside the barrier, yes."

"Thank you. If it comes to it, please notify me," She tapped her earpiece. "Nonon was right to keep me from the fight but... it seems now we come to the last dash. We still have some time to go yet?"

~ "I'm afraid... yes. At least an hour, plus the hybridization procedure." ~

Satsuki sighed, "I can't imagine that you will be able to hold her off long enough, then. There's no chance that Rei or Mako will arrive in time?"

~ "Neither of them are in any condition to fight!" ~ Izanami protested. There was no point keeping this conversation quiet from Ryuko, not matter how much it distressed her. She would have heard anyway. ~ "The only one in combat ready condition is Uzu, but his flight is too slow. He'd never make it in time." ~

Satsuki looked at Mataro, she was so grave that he felt a lump forming in his chest. *She thinks we're all going to die.*

*[We might. It's only us and Yuda at full capacity and neither of us can stand a chance. Do you think Nonon can?]*

“Mataro. Do what you can,” Satsuki said. *If we had not humored him, given him Wakaiketsu, he'd be safe in a bunker right now.* “And tell Nonon... tell her not to blame herself. I know she will.”

“Okay.” But doing what he could just felt horribly inadequate. *If this is our last stand, buying time will be so much harder. We'll have our backs against a wall.*

*[Let's face it, that's not our style,]* Wakaiketsu was working through the same problem. *[I'd feel like we had a chance if we at least had the **option** to run away.]*

“I'd be okay with running away,” Mataro murmured to her. Satsuki's attention had returned to Ryuko (or she would have been concerned) and Ryuko heard both sides of the conversation. “But can't do that when we're at the place we run to!”

*Then we should fight her someplace not here,* the realization hit them both at once. That didn't seem like something any of them would agree to. But they had to try. Mataro loudly said, “Actually, no.” That got Satsuki's attention back on him. “I'll go fight her.”

Satsuki blinked, then asked incredulously, “*You?*”

“Yeah, me. We'll catch her in Tokyo, stall for time. With our stealth mode, we can disappear into the streets and she'll have to chase us.”

Right, stealth mode. Kamui battles moved so fast and often over such a variety of terrain that using eyes and ears to detect a foe was just impossible. The kamui had an intuitive sense of where each other were that worked much better instead. All of them except Wakaiketsu. Her aura was invisible unless she wanted to be seen. Satsuki's eyebrows perked up as she realized this wasn't just a brave gesture. “That might actually work.” Mataro inflated with pride and got some of his color back, until she said, “But are you sure you know what you're up against? You've never faced anything like a hybrid, even in practice you've never had a chance to fight Ryuko. You will... you will probably die.”

He hadn't expected her to just come right out and say it. And it hit him like a punch to the gut. *Right, what am I thinking? An actual hybrid.* The academic idea of it, his trajectory intercepting Minazuki's, that made it seem so easy. Watching her fight with Aikuro and Tsumugu through a satellite feed, it still seemed not too different from kamui fighting. But then he remembered Ragyo. Her cold light in the Honnouji arena. The glee with which she lorded her superiority over everyone, breaking Ryuko and Satsuki's will each in turn. *What chance do I have?* He remembered that he was supposed to be afraid right now. That didn't change his mind about what had to be done. But it made it almost impossible for him to get the words out.

Wakaiketsu, on the other hand, couldn't have a lump in her throat. She said, *[Let's do it, Mataro! This is our **moment**! This is when we learn what we're truly made of!]*

“Wakaiketsu, you're really okay with that?” He asked.

*[Mm! Satsuki's right, we might end up dying. But only if we don't fight harder than we ever have before! This time we won't hold anything back!]* She wasn't just talking about raw swordsmanship, but about what had gone wrong with Lucielle, the Couturie girl from before. This time, there would be no pity, no chance of redemption, no negotiations. Which meant if Minazuki had even a shred of humanity within her, Mataro had another weapon against her. Irritation. *[If all we've got to do is buy time, you **know** we can get her to chase us!]*

Their shared mental image brought a smile to his face in spite of everything. He said to Satsuki, "I know. I've got basically no chance in a fair fight. Hell, I don't think I've ever been very good in a fair fight."

"Then... don't fight fair," Ryuko said. She'd been weighing up Mataro's chances just the same as he had and come to about the same conclusion. *I should stop this. He's going off to his death.* She thought, *If he's made up his mind, I'm probably the only one who can.* And yet he was the perfect choice to stall Minazuki in the streets of Tokyo. *Relying on Mankanshoku, even the least reliable one, I suppose that's just the way it is for me. And if it's their lives for Nozomi's - please, don't let it come to that - but if that's a trade they're willing to make... Then so am I.* She motioned for him to approach, which he did by passing behind Satsuki's chair and around her head with his eyes on the floor. She lifted her free fist to him and said, "Jump her in a blind alley."

Mataro grinned, that too-wide Mankanshoku grin. "Yeah, that didn't go so well, the last time I tried it on a hybrid."

"Hah," Ryuko wasn't capable of actually laughing at the moment, but she appreciated the attempt. "Only 'cuz you couldn't fight back. Different this time."

"It is." He touched his knuckles to hers. That was horribly bittersweet for her. His only chance lay in confidence, if he hesitated or was afraid she'd cut him down easily. But to say these things to him, knowing better than him how slim his chances really were was so cold, so heartless. Even if it was what he needed to hear. *If he fights without killing intent, if they don't think they can do it, it's over before it's even started.*

"I want you..." here Ryuko had to pause to fight down the pain from the surgery, "To leave her in one piece for me. But you do what you've got to do."

Mataro abruptly straightened his back. *[Kill her?]* Wakaiketsu was just as shocked as him. They hadn't really thought that was possible. But there she was, nodding to confirm it, *Ryuko thinks we could kill her! She does!* He almost bounded out of the room. At the doorway he stopped, turning to take one last look at them both. The thought crossed his mind, *this might be the last time I see them,* and he tried to remember them the way he would prefer it. Satsuki removing his blindfold, Ryuko the first time she saved Mako.

There was a lot more he wanted to say to them. Too much for now. And in just a few hours he'd know if he'd ever see them again, if Ryuko would no longer be one-of-a-kind, if he would be known by everyone as a hero second only to them or a screw-up and failure. Which made most of what he wanted to say irrelevant. So instead he just said, "Thanks. For everything."

Outside, Nonon jumped to her feet (with a wince which she tried to hide) and said, "Okay boys, let's strike up the band!" A rather pointless order. Yuda was already ready, pacing anxiously, and Shiro was still laying down staring at the ceiling - he had to be there for the hybridization and so wouldn't be fighting until all other options were gone. Mataro ignored it too and walked over to Shiro.

“Hey, Shiro, can I get my booster pills?” He asked.

Shiro nodded, that was not an unexpected request and actually surprisingly smart for Mataro. They could use every advantage they could get against Minazuki and Rei had proved they provided a significant boost to a kamui wearer’s power and reaction times. For a while, anyway. “How many?”

“All of them.”

Shiro sat up. He didn’t exactly decline to do it, and a panel in the floor popped open to raised up a table with a packet holding a few dozen of the small white tabs. “Now hold on. You remember what I told you? You can’t take more than one at a time!”

“But when it wears off, I’ll crash,” He said simply, “So…”

Nonon and Shiro shared an alarmed glance, but Mataro scurried up and snatched the pills before either of them could react. Nonon wasn’t far behind though, and with Kiba in one hand she grabbed him by the collar with the other and hoisted him up off his feet. “What the hell do you think you’re doing!”

“Let me go!” Mataro shouted back. He’d known Nonon wouldn’t take this well. “I’m going to go fight Minazuki!”

“WHAT!”

“I’ll stall for time! In the city, I can use Wakaiketsu’s ‘stealth mode’ to hide and keep her on her toes!” He pointed to the hospital room, a solid white block emerging from the floor, “Ryuko said I could!”

“Bullshit!” Nonon hissed, but she did let go of Mataro.

“Then go ask her yourself!” Nonon blanched a bit at that suggestion. She was regretting sending Mataro in to report deeply, but there was still no way she would expose herself to that again.

“Ryuko is not in any state to issue orders, or Satsuki either,” She said, trying to work out what chain of events could have lead to this suicidal idea.

“It was my idea!”

“Well,” Nonon scoffed. Even worse for Mataro to have taken the initiative, while she sat here feeling helpless. “I don’t know where you’ve been for the last four years, but this is a *military* operation! We’re here to win, not be heroes! I’m not going to let you throw away a life, even if it is your own!”

At this point Mataro had fully made up his mind, and Wakaiketsu didn’t care much either. “We don’t have any other option,” He said firmly, “I’m going.”

“The hell you are,” Nonon grumbled and turned to Shiro, “Have Izanami lock the gates and - no.” She correctly read the impassive look on Shiro’s face, “Izanami already heard and you already approved, didn’t you?”

Shiro nodded, “It’s not actually that tactically inept. Another line of defense none of us could see. But I can’t let you take all of those pills!” He exclaimed to Mataro, “Just take one in your cheek, if

you really need it!”

“What if it wears off too fast?” Mataro said, “If I took another-”

“-If you took another who knows what would happen! I-I don’t think your heart could take the strain!”

“But you don’t know! I’m gonna keep the option open!”

“But - you - rrgh! Alright, fine. Promise me you won’t even consider taking a second pill unless it’s that, or death.”

“Yeah, of course, I promise,” Mataro said, dismissively enough that Shiro figured he probably did actually appreciate the risk. And he did, if Shiro thought that his heart might explode from taking two pills he was probably right. But if it was either kill Minazuki and have surgery after or get killed by Minazuki right then and there, only one of those scenarios had a non-zero survival rate.

Shiro nodded and waved a hand at him to say, “*Fine then, if you insist I’ve got more important things to do.*” Mataro turned to go, but he found *Kiba* blocking his way. Nonon dropped it in front of him like a railroad crossing.

“Listen here, *kid*,” She seethed, “I made a promise to your mother. I’m not letting you do this, no matter what Ryuko or Satsuki has to say.”

“I don’t care. I’m going.”

She pointed *Kiba* right at his nose and glared at him. Her eyes were bloodshot and dry and at this point, desperate. “Then you’re going through me.” Mataro must’ve looked skeptical because she said, “Huh? If you can’t handle me, then what chance do you have against Mina-”

In a flash, Mataro’s swords were in his hands and thrusting towards her. But she was ready. She back pedaled, swatted them aside, and lunged back in. Even powered down, a kamui provided a modicum of speed and strength enhancement to its wearer, and Saiban was stronger than Wakaiketsu. By a lot. The young kamui jolted as Mataro just managed to block a vicious overhead strike. Nonon kept up the pressure and forced Mataro back. Within just a few strikes, it became clear that Nonon intended to just batter Mataro down. And that she definitely could.

Mataro’s one hope was to reposition, to try and dash around her to find an opening. With all the bandages on her back, her flexibility might be impaired just enough to make it possible. So he feinted one way and sprung out the other, dropping to one knee to slide under her backswing. Of course, Nonon knew he would try this. She twirled *Kiba* around and stabbed backward, anticipating that he would try to press his sword to the back of her neck. But Mataro had dipped one of his swords down as he slid, and it tipped into the floor and scratched out a sharp-edged fragment of concrete. It flipped through the air, and at just the right moment he slapped it at Nonon with the flat side of a sword. Like a speartip, it sank right into the bandages on her shoulder, right where the scar Rosuketsu had given her was.

“Ow! Bastard!” Nonon yelped shrilly as her arm was briefly immobilized. But then she froze. She knew without seeing it what had happened. Her stab had been aborted halfway and now there was a swordtip dangling just behind the back of her neck. She was beaten. She let *Kiba* clatter to the ground. “Not fair.” She reeled, both from the sudden gush of blood that was trickling down her back and from how humiliatingly impossible this situation was.

“There’s no such thing as fair in a fight,” Mataro said, repeating back words she had told him more than once.

*[Nonon, just like that?]* For once it was Saiban who was still indignant while the wind had been sucked right out of her sails. *[Over one little trick?]*

“No, Saiban, that’s enough.” She straightened her back, turned to look at Mataro over her shoulder. “You want to go kill yourself? Fine. See what I care.”

“This is what I signed up for. I’m ready.”

There were no more protests. They wasted no time powering up. At the last moment, Yuda cleared his throat and shouted, “Wait Mataro! Let me go with you!”

Nonon glared at him as if fully ready to repeat the combat trail on him (although at this point Shiro was already busy replacing her bandages). Mataro shook his head and said, “Sorry, but this only works because I can hide.”

“But you shouldn’t fight alone!”

“I’m not alone,” He put a hand over his chest. Yuda nodded grimly, Mataro was right. Moved though he was by Mataro’s bravery, he’d watched over the night as more than half of the Kamui Corps had tried their hand against a hybrid and come up short. Fighters he knew full well were more experienced than he, with kamui that had absorbed many more life-fibers. In the final line of defense, he could watch Nonon’s back. Bodyguarding was, after all, what he’d been trained for. Being a thief in the night was what Mataro had trained for.

Mataro tore off, heading towards a gate below the life-fiber barrier dome at the Southeast end of the research complex. That way lay the heart of Tokyo, and beyond it the bay. “That’s the wrong way, idiot!” Nonon yelled after him.

“I know!” He shouted back. “I have to get something first!”

~~~~~

4:25 am

~~~~~

Remorse was Ryuko’s immediate reaction as Mataro left. Doubly so after Nonon failed to stop him. She’d sent him off to die. Izanami warned her insistently that she needed to focus; her vital levels were fluctuating alarmingly. But she couldn’t manage it. *How could I let this happen? That’s the last time I’ll see him* (she was too distraught to insert the word “probably”) *And Mako, Mom and Dad, they don’t even know!* The thought of the Mankanshokus as they were when she met them at Honnouji sitting down to dinner without that little twerp was unthinkable. And knowing now that this was how it ended up cast a painful darkness over all those happy memories. *They welcomed me into their home, and in exchange I brought them death. They’ll never forgive me, and they shouldn’t either. Trading his life for Nozomi, hah! But, would I **really** take it back if I could? No... Hell fucking no! Nozomi means more than anything to me. Nobody else can possibly understand.* But that only made her feel more guilty.

“Ryuko, talk to me,” Satsuki pleaded with her gently. Mataro leaving had a similar effect on her, but with the opposite result. She had to make his sacrifice worth it and that overpowered the panic, the lightheadedness, and the nausea that came with seeing Ryuko cut open. If Mataro died to give the world the gift of immortality, that was the only way anyone would ever forgive them. She squeezed Ryuko’s hand harder and said, “What’s wrong?”

“Hah!” Ryuko laughed, though it sounded more like a pained groan, “What’s wrong? It’s all gone so wrong!” She turned her head towards Satsuki and said, “Is this the point of encouraging him all these years? Just blowing smoke up his ass so he dies at the right time! I should *never* have let him go! I’m horrible!”

“No, no!” Satsuki murmured, stroking Ryuko’s sweat-soaked hair off her forehead. “My love, you can’t blame yourself. He’s a man now, he chose this. And Wakaiketsu too. What would you and Senketsu have done?”

Ryuko hadn’t thought of it that way. It took her a moment to make the connection. *Dad...* Then she tried to deny it. *No, it’s impossible. It’s nothing like with Dad. No, if I had had an older friend, someone I looked up to, and I saw them lying there, in pain and afraid, then -* there he was, slumped against the wall, scissor blade still half inside him, cut to ribbons and barely breathing. And everything that would come after. *No, he couldn’t possibly feel like that for me.* And if he did, then they *all* did. Ira with his lost arm, Tsumugu and Aikuro risking it all on one final gambit. Even Nonon. *She wasn’t just grossed out, I know exactly how she felt when she saw what happened to me and knew there was nothing she could do.* It hurt too much to think that the same impotent grief and rage might be in even her right now. *And Satsuki...* She looked into Satsuki’s eyes and unlike with the others there was no barrier there. She knew exactly how far Satsuki was willing to go because of what she had put her through today.

It was all too much. She began to cry, and once she started couldn’t possibly stop. Alarms beeped out again as she cringed inward, and Satsuki’s hands flew up in a panic. Usually she would have slapped some sense into Ryuko now, but she was out of her depth. “Wh-what did I say! Ryuko!” She moaned.

~ “*Ryuko get it together! PLEASE!*” ~ Izanami yelped. Ryuko knew exactly how bad things could get if she didn’t get herself under control; she would have if she could. But all the torment she had endured over the last hours was wrenching itself free now, in one noisy sob after another. Knowing that she had - without even meaning to, without even considering it - inflicted the same fate onto Mataro that her father had on her broke her last restraints of self control.

What made it all the worse was that just the same, it was all for the sake of the struggle against the life-fibers, against The Thing Behind the Veil. For her father turning her loose upon Ragyo meant everything, and now Nozomi’s hybridization clearly meant everything to the enemy. Any sacrifice had to be justified to make sure it happened. No matter how much it hurt. She was caught in the middle of something huge and horrible that even she didn’t understand.

*Oh Senketsu, I wish you were here! Where did I go wrong? Isn’t there anything that can help him?* This was far from the first time she’d wished to hear from Senketsu in the last nine months.

But this time would be different.

This time, there was a response.

[*Ryuko*]



Ryuko gasped and immediately froze. The red in her hair glowed brighter suddenly, invigorated with a fresh burst of life.

As soon as Ryuko's convulsive sobbing stopped, Izanami reasserted control with mechanical precision. She was furious and she said, ~ *"Way to go Ryuko, that's fifteen minutes of progress lo-"* ~ Izanami got just a momentary glimpse, a passing sensation of Senketsu, and it struck her speechless. Her entire reality was a tiny rowboat, and it had just been rocked by a whale gliding through the depths below. Equal parts awe, terror, and fascination left her feeling unshakably compelled by it, as though she could dive off the edge of this dimension and follow him. *A kamui can become all that?*

"Senketsu!" Ryuko would have jumped up, but she didn't need to move anywhere to embrace him. He was there, all around her, sharing her mind the same way he used to. It wasn't the same as when they were both in their true bodies, when thoughts flowed unimpeded between them, but it was a nostalgic, earthy feeling. It felt like home. She relaxed into it and felt her pain replaced by warmth.

"Senketsu!" Satsuki could feel a tremor of his passage through Ryuko's life-fibers in her clothes. She looked up, following the trail of Ryuko's newly alert eyes, but there was nothing to see.

*[I've missed you, Ryuko.]*

"Senketsu..." She was on the verge of tears again, lips quaking. There was a gentle, reproachful smile to his voice and that was unbelievably reassuring. He saw things more clearly than she, and knew everything was going to be alright. "Ah, Senketsu. I - oh I've *missed* you!" She even managed to laugh to herself and say, "I was, uh, kinda hoping you wouldn't see me like this."

*[Oh, I've seen you in worse shape. And you me cut to pieces!]* He chuckled, but then said more seriously, *[But this... I knew you had it in you.]*

"But how?" Satsuki asked the air, "Didn't you say -"

"Yeah how?" Ryuko asked, "What about hiding? Won't they find out you're alive? I - I mean, not that I'm not glad you're here," She finished in a small, sweet voice. But it was deadly serious. If Senketsu could intervene, *really* intervene, then Mataro might be saved! All her troubles might be over. For now. But then, what if that drew the attention of the whole life-fiber network, or even of their master? Revealing themselves before Senketsu had fully mastered Shinra Koketsu might bring certain destruction down on them. "And Shinra Koketsu?" Ryuko asked, "Have you mastered it?"

*[I think it's too late for that, I hate to say. Minazuki is just a small part of them, but after tonight when we kill her, and even more so after Nozomi, they will have to take notice. If they haven't already. They've forced our hand.]*

Ryuko gulped, "Yes, yes you're right. I guess it's all starting then." The weight of doom felt like it was going to crush her. A being the scale and magnitude of which she could scarcely comprehend had sent Minazuki to stop her from giving birth to another hybrid. That was the heart of it. She didn't know what The Thing Behind the Veil was capable of, what it wanted, what it would do if it didn't get its way. But she wasn't about to roll over and quit now. The whole universe might be out for her baby daughter, but Senketsu had said *when* not *if* they killed Minazuki.

"Starting?" Satsuki asked, "What do you mean?"

*[As for Shinra Koketsu, I have absorbed some of its power. Enough to have a pretty big impact here on Earth,]* Ryuko could hear a bit of a smile creep into his voice. He was eager to try it out, *[After that, we can only wait and see what comes.]*

Well, that was equal parts reassuring and worrying. Worst case scenario, The Thing flexed its full and unimaginable power the moment Nozomi was successfully hybridized and the entire planet was instantly dropped into a black hole. *Well, I'll just have to try and fight even that! Senketsu and I can go up against the impossible!* But for now, “Then, help Mataro! Please! You’ve got to crush Minazuki, promise you’ll do that.”

*[I will. I've already begun. I will stop the battle in the North as well. Everything I can,]* Senketsu answered earnestly. *[But it's more than that, Ryuko. I can't let you go through any more of this alone.]* Again Ryuko felt like she was going to cry. *[I'll be with you Ryuko, until the end.]*

“Ah, Senketsu,” she sniffed, “Thank you .”

*[You can do this! But, there's one thing. Satsuki. You'll need to tell her everything.]*

“Everything?”

*[Everything. You will have to tell her everything we know about what we're up against. Things we hoped wouldn't happen for a thousand years might happen tomorrow.]* Ryuko nodded. *[And... everything else, too.]*

Ryuko’s eyes darted over to Satsuki. She was waiting with bated breath, only hearing Ryuko’s breathless replies to Senketsu’s telepathic messages. “Senketsu, I-I can’t!” She knew exactly what Senketsu meant. He wanted her to tell Satsuki about what Ragyo had done to her older sister, what kind of relationship they had. She should have told her long ago, but what if she saw the same cyclical pattern in it that had shamed their lives? Even now, Ryuko was still terrified. Would she turn against her? Would she refuse to have Nozomi hybridized?

“Ryuko? What is he saying?” Satsuki hung on every word, trying to guess what the other side of the conversation might be. It was hard, but just from “Everything” and “I can’t” and that glance towards her she figured out the jist of it. Senketsu wanted her to know what lay lurking in the darkness of the invisible worlds. What it was really like to *be* Ryuko, what she was signing her daughter up for. To give her one last chance to refuse. *Well, that's not going to happen.*

*[You have to! She deserves to know what she's getting into. I know what you're afraid of, that she might stop loving you if she knows it all. But you know she won't. Trust her!]* Senketsu said, *[After all, didn't she once say that you two were 'like her, but better'? This is the final thing, the last thing Ragyo never managed. An immortal daughter. And now here you are.]*

Ryuko smiled, “Yeah, like her but better.”

“Huh?”

Ryuko took Satsuki’s hand again, rubbing her knuckles with her thumb. She looked shockingly calm and confident with the light back in her hair and the sweat on her brow gradually receding. It was still hard for her to sound confident - Senketsu might be right in the end - but at first Satsuki would be mad. In the end that wouldn’t matter, and she managed it, “Satsuki. Everything’s going to be okay! Senketsu’s going to save Mataro and we - and we are going to have a baby! With you and Senketsu at my side, I can do this!” Satsuki’s face lit up, just seeing Ryuko look so happy was

enough even if she didn't understand it all. *It doesn't matter what secrets she has,* she thought, *This is everything I need.* "After that, I'll tell you everything Senketsu and I know, even the parts that I don't know how to explain. But -"

"- That's alright, Ryuko," Satsuki squeezed her hand in return, "Don't be afraid. This is enough for me."

~~~~~  
3:30 am  
~~~~~

Mako meant to go back to Research Complex, she really did, but as she fled from Minazuki her instincts led her to her home in Kansai. She entered through the window, easy enough with flight but also she didn't have her keys. The dogs slunk away, tails between their legs, and Mako realized she hadn't powered Tonbo down. "Aw, dya not recognize me?" She asked as she drifted to the ground in the kitchen, "Here, c'mere." Eventually they responded to her sweet beckoning and she was able to let them smell her. "Yeah, there you go," She cooed as their tails wagged and she was able to pet them, "Gosh, I was supposed to feed you when we got home! You must be starving!"

As Mako busied herself pouring out kibble and refilling water bowls, Tonbo said, *[Mako we really shouldn't dawdle here.]*

"I know, we won't," She murmured. *They didn't recognize me!* Mako thought with a shudder about seeing her reflection while Tonbo was at the peak of his power. *It seemed magical then, but...* what Minazuki had said came back to her unbidden, *"The change has already begun. You aren't human anymore."*

"Urgh that Minazuki is so crazy!" Mako said aloud, storming into the living room and thumping onto the couch. She didn't bother turning the lights on so the only illumination came from Tonbo, and in the relative silence she could hear rain pattering on the roof and thunder grumbling in the distance. "Tonbo, can you turn off the rain now?"

*[I, um, how am I supposed to do that?]*

Mako didn't know either. "Nevermind. 'S probably based on my mood still, anyway." And a steady, melancholy downpour with no wind blanketing everything sure felt suited to it right now.

After a few seconds during which they both tried and failed to relax, Tonbo said, *[There's no way to know if Tekketsu and Ira are okay, is there?]*

"They're okay," Mako replied flatly. She wanted to believe that with every fiber of her being, and after everything they'd been through how couldn't they be okay. But then, she also wanted to believe that everything Minazuki said about Ryuko was either a lie or a delusion. "I suppose there's my comms. I could call, see who answers." Ira didn't have his earpiece in, but someone else could tell her what had happened and they would be happy to know she was in one piece.

But she didn't. She hesitated, just as she hesitated to carry on to Ryuko. All through the flight back she had been at war with herself. She couldn't even admit to what she was feeling. But the

absolute confidence in Minazuki's voice, the ease with which she had broken from Ira's clutches, it had shaken Mako. She heard her words repeating even as she tried to force it back down. *Stop it!* She barked at the doubts in the back of her mind.

Mako remained in this state of paralysis for much longer than she'd meant to. The minutes ticked by as she searched in vain for the resolve to go on. She'd forgotten in the intensity about the wound she'd taken in her forearm, but now the pain started to come back and she clutched at the bandage Tonbo had wrapped around it. She wanted to hurry to Ryuko's side, as she well knew the clock was still ticking and Minazuki was still out there. But she didn't. Tonbo wasn't faring any better, their thoughts on this matter were the same. Eventually he said, *[You're thinking what if Minazuki's right, aren't you?]*

"Shut. up. Don't say that!"

*[Why not? I don't think she's right, it just doesn't make sense, but you have to admit it's scary. We won't know for sure until Nozomi is hybridized and I can feel her aura. No chance it's just more Ryuko, but until we can see for sure you gotta admit it makes you a bit jumpy.]*

"I don't have to admit anything!" Mako shot him an angry glare from the corners of her eyes and crossed her arms, "Minazuki's a lunatic, a crazy lunatic who wants to kill us! You don't have to listen to her!" But why hadn't she left for the Research Complex yet? If she was so sure, why hesitate? The question sat there unasked, like a stale croquette on the plate, taunting them both. Eventually Mako said, "You haven't been with her as long, I know, but you've got to know you can't just say that. You can't betray Ryuko like that."

*[Just thinking about it is betraying her?]*

"Yes! It is! It's betraying her because... because she doesn't deserve that! After everything she's done for me, for everyone, to turn around now and say she's just using us for her own game would be so wrong!" Mako insisted loudly, "And besides, it's just not true! When I first met Ryuko she wasn't interested in me, just finding out who killed her dad! If Mataro hadn't brought her home all passed out, I'd probably never have seen her after she rescued me from Fukuroda! I-I might not remember it all perfect, it's been a while, but as far as I remember she wasn't looking for someone she could *use*, even for a place to crash for the night! She wasn't playing some kind of long game, no way, now that is absurd!" Unless Ryuko was only pretending not to care. Supplementing what was actually going on in Ryuko's head (which Mako knew very well) for Minazuki's hypothetical cold, manipulative alien, Mako couldn't help but wonder, *what if she was only acting that way, waiting for someone to volunteer to help her. Someone who would be easy to control. Someone like me.* It was such a freakish, evil thought that it was impossible to bury it again. It was so frightening that there was something tantalizing about it, daring her to consider just how much of her life would be all wrong if it were true. Everything. Her whole world, built on lies. How could she just ignore that possibility?

*[You remember it all quite well though,]* Tonbo reminded her. *[It was so important, so you swore you'd remember it exactly as it was. Minazuki has you questioning that! You shouldn't let her,]* He finished on a note meant to encourage her, but it just made her scowl deeper. She hated that Tonbo was right.

"Damn her!" She yelled. "What kind of alien... *thing* does she even think Ryuko is? She thinks she could pretend to be human so well for all these years? There's no way that's possible, is there?"

*[I don't think so.]*

“See? You don’t think so, you don’t *know* !” Mako finally gave voice to her doubts, “I mean let’s face it, we don’t know Jack. Fucking. Shit!”

*[Mako!]* Tonbo was shocked by her profanity, even knowing how rattled she was.

She waved her hands angrily in the air “Well seriously! I-I mean what do we really know? I never understand what they’re saying when they talk about powers and other dimensions and everything, like it’s another place but also overlapping our world? What does that even mean?” Tonbo didn’t know either, “Where do your powers even come from?” Out the window, the rain seemed to come down all the harder. It was a chilling sight for both of them. A huge, invisible creature warping the world around them, and neither of them felt in full control. In a much smaller voice, Mako asked, “We’re not really *becoming* something, are we?”

*It’s a bit too late to worry about that*, they both realized. The invisible world that Ryuko and Minazuki were so concerned with seemed to loom, dark and horrible, in front of them. “She could be God in her universe,” Mako murmured, “That’s what Minazuki said.” She wondered about that for a while. It sounded like the way Ryuko described it herself, except when she did always with the caveat that she wished she could share it. Her head was swimming and she couldn’t keep any of this straight. “I feel like I’m going crazy,” she said, “I wish... I wish I’d listened to her more when she came to me worried about not being human in the first place. I just wanted to make her feel better, I didn’t know what it was really like.”

*[How could you? Nobody knows what it’s like to be her;]* Tonbo tried to console her.

But when Mako tried to put herself in Ryuko’s shoes she said, “If she knew what we’re saying right now,” And immediately started to feel weepy because it really felt like she’d betrayed Ryuko, and she couldn’t even help herself from doing it. “God, we’re *horrible* !”

*[You’re not horrible, Mako.]*

Another telepathic voice popped into Mako’s head. That was a huge shock to her because Tonbo’s voice was the only one she was used to hearing directly; she couldn’t hear the other kamui but Tonbo could, so it was like she remembered hearing what they said the second after they said it. This was different, the voice was *right there* . Calm, deep and dry, it sounded almost impeccably honest. And super familiar, but Mako couldn’t quite place it. And as she heard him, a powerful sensation rolled over Tonbo. The trace of an aura, something huge and cool rolling over him. *No, it can’t be!*

“Who’s there!” Mako leapt to her feet and grabbed her bat from where it was leaning on the edge of the couch. She brandished it at nothing in the darkened living room.

*[Whoa! It’s alright, Mako! I’m glad you can clearly hear me.]*

That was all it took for Mako to figure it out. Her bat clattered to the ground. The change in her expression, her eyes, even her posture went through an instant change. In fact, her feet lifted off the ground and even the rain came down a little more softly. “Senketsu?”

*[No way!]* Tonbo was ecstatic. They both were. Darkness from an invisible world? Hardly. That was *Senketsu*! Ryuko’s Senketsu! *Which means - which means -*

“You’re alive! You’re real and you’re alive!” Mako burst out exuberantly, “HahahaHAHAAAA!” In a chain reaction, all of Minazuki’s claims blew up in Mako’s mind. She might as well have completely forgotten. With Tonbo there backing her up, she didn’t even need to wonder if she was going crazy. No, Senketsu had come back for them, right when they really needed him. That felt like destiny. Naturally, they were both all-in from that very moment on.

*[I am. I was hoping you’d feel better if I showed you that, it seems like it worked.]*

“Yes sir!” Mako chirped, “Because you being alive means exactly what I thought! Minazuki’s nothing but a liar, trying to make us not trust each other! Not gonna work on us anymore, right Tonbo!”

*[Right!]*

“But how did you-”

*[Oh, there’s another thing I know will make you feel better,] Senketsu said, [Ira and Tekketsu are alive and well.]*

“They are?” The last bit of fear unclenched from Mako’s chest. She could have screamed with delight, but she didn’t want to miss anything Senketsu said. Outside, all was quiet and still besides a cool breeze.

*[Oh thank goodness!] Tonbo gasped as if he’d been holding his breath. [What would we have done without them! But, what about their arm?]*

*[Tekketsu was able to construct a new one,] Senketsu said simply. Tonbo got an odd sensation then, as Senketsu’s presence around him shuffled nervously. He awkwardly cleared his throat and said, [This is, well, this is actually my first time speaking to another Kamui. I’m pleased to meet you, Tonbo. Are you adjusting to... everything alright?]*

The name Senketsu invoked a sense of awe and mystery to the kamui who had come after him. A lone kamui who had ascended beyond their realm of conception all on his own. And maybe he was that, but now Tonbo realized he was a lot more like Ryuko than he’d thought. At least, how Ryuko had been when Mako first met her. Someone who really wanted to reach out, but had no idea what to say. He immediately wanted to be friends with him.

*[Oh, it’s not so bad as all that!] Tonbo said, and started carrying on very quickly, [We’re just a bit rattled today, you get it. Are you going to talk to the rest of us soon? You should, they’d all like that. And we’re all great friends, you’ll see. Or, well, it’s different for each of us. Wakaiketsu and Rama get on each other’s nerves a lot, probably because they awoke at the same time and they’re rivals like that. And Tekketsu and I are in love.]*

*[In love!] Senketsu sputtered. He could hardly conceive of how a kamui could be in love.*

*[Mhm!] Tonbo bubbled innocently, [I don’t know if you heard, but Mako and Ira are engaged, too.]*

*[I had a notion,] Senketsu said, and sighed, [You weren’t even awake the last time Ryuko could visit me. I’ve been hiding my presence from the life-fiber network, so I couldn’t check in as often as I would have liked, but now... well it’s too late for that. When this is over, you’ll have to tell me about it.]*

While the kamui were talking, Mako picked up her bat again. She stomped out of the room and Senketsu said, *[Mako? Where are you going?]*

“I’m gonna go and knock Minazuki’s lights out!” She pulled a fist like she imagined Ryuko would, “And I’m gonna rub her face in just how wrong she was! She looked up and back into the house as though Senketsu would be there hovering over her shoulder and said, “She’s still alive, and so is Ryuko, or you’d’ve started with that, right?”

*[Yes? Mako, you do realize how dangerous that is, don’t you?]*

“So? She still needs help! I know it’s dangerous and Ira said to just run, but that’s what we’ve got to do! She needs us.”

*[Right!]* Tonbo was quick to agree.

*[I won’t try to stop you,]* Senketsu said, *[But I was expecting that you would go to Ryuko’s side instead. She is fighting hard to deliver Nozomi, having you there would make her much less worried.]*

“I don’t care!” Mako blurted out, “Or, no, I do. But she shouldn’t worry. Now that we have you, I know we’re going to win.”

She felt like Senketsu blinked in surprise then. *[Alright then,]* the timbre of his voice changed, becoming much more enthusiastic. *[In that case, you should get moving towards Tokyo. Mataro is there, getting ready to face Minazuki.]*

Mako clapped her hands to her cheeks. “WHAT! Just Mataro? B-but he on his own-”

*[He’s going to stall for time,]* Senketsu explained seriously, *[With just him and Wakaiketsu, his chances of survival are very slim. Minazuki knows she’s running out of time and she won’t toy with him.]*

*[Then we’ve got to help!]* Tonbo mirrored Mako’s sentiments on the matter.

*[I can help guide you to him,]* Senketsu said, *[And if you’ll accept it, I’d like to help as well.]*

“Yes! Er, how?” Mako asked,

*[Let me make a temporary connection with Tonbo so I can guide your hands,]* Senketsu said.

“Oh, you mean empowerment! Yeah, totally!” The idea gave Mako and Tonbo chills. They would be wreathed in fire, overflowing with power. The way the other’s described it, it sounded *awesome*. “Just give us a powerup, and we’ll beat her up, piece of cake!”

*[More power isn’t what you need. You’ve got more than enough to match Minazuki as is,]* Senketsu chuckled, *[What you need is the skills to go up against her, and I can provide that. I can provide you with Ryuko’s combat experience. I have all her memories, countless hours of sparring and all her most intense battles. If you let me guide you, you can have them all too.]*

Whoa. That was even better. So much more than just raw strength, that was Ryuko’s true power. “Yes! I’ll do it! It’s perfect, actually,” Mako said with a giggle, “When Ryuko and Nonon tried this, it didn’t work because their styles were too different. But I don’t have a fighting style!” She

rapped her bat on the side of her head - as hollow as a coconut, “So I can just do *exactly* what Ryuko would do!”

*[Great!]* Senketsu beamed. This was a side of Senketsu Mako had never seen before, but Ryuko knew well. He had come to Mako calm and consoling, but in the face of someone who wanted to fight for Ryuko just as much as him, he couldn’t hold back. *[But you know, empowerment also didn’t work for Nonon because she couldn’t trust Ryuko. You’re going to have to give over control of your body, you’ve never experienced anything like this. So you need to trust me completely. Do you understand? Are you ready for that?]*

“Yup! I got it!”

*[... You know Mako, I believe that you do,]* He said, *[You might be the only person I know who could say that in this situation and really mean it.]*

“Mhm! That’s right! Because now I know I shoulda never doubted you, it’s the least I can do!” Mako was up and moving, but not for the door. Instead, she threw open the fridge. It was well stocked with ingredients and carefully packaged leftovers. She began rummaging around purposefully.

*[Uh, Mako? What are you doing?]* Senketsu asked. As if it weren’t obvious.

“I need a late-night snack, duh!” Mako replied cheerfully, “I can’t do this on an empty stomach!”

*[Wha - no!]* Senketsu was indignant, but he couldn’t summon up a full extent of rage. Mako, of course. What had he expected? *[There’s no time to waste! Tonbo, tell her - ]*

*[Ooh, can you reheat the marinated chicken along with the croquettes?]*

“Do you think that really goes?” Mako replied. All Senketsu could do was watch, utterly baffled. No, how could Tonbo like to eat as much as Mako? Kamui were meant to keep watch on their human’s physical condition, weren’t they?

*[Ehhh... Then what about the soup? We can have that with a couple extra croquettes and add another dip, make a bit of a sampler,]* Like his human, Tonbo was totally absorbed in the fridge and its contents.

Mako shrugged, “Alright.” She produced two large glass containers, one filled with precooked croquettes and the other soup, and deftly began to portion them out. “Sorry Senketsu! This’ll just take a sec!” Once she’d prepared a plate and a bowl, she popped the former in the microwave. Then there was nothing to do but wait. Mako leaned up against the counter and listened to the electric hum of her food heating. “So... how’ve you been?” She asked the air.

*[I - uh - well,]* Senketsu was at total loss. Nobody, not even Ryuko (she instinctively knew) had ever asked him “*how he was*”. It was kind of a scary question, actually. *[I’m doing well,]* He answered mechanically, *[Making good progress at learning Shinra Koketsu’s power.]*

“Hmm,” Mako shrugged, “You must’ve missed Ryuko a lot, huh?”

*[... Yes. But, time works differently for me now, so when she comes to visit it feels like plenty of time,]* He said optimistically, *[So in the scale of things, it’s not that long.]*



*[Nine months is still pretty long,]* Tonbo said. *[Though, maybe I don't have the best perspective on that, I'm not even that old!]* Being separated from Mako for even a day sounded dreadful. He wouldn't be able to enjoy or even really do anything alone. Just wasted time. *Senketsu is very old and very, very patient. He was awestruck.*

*[Yes, well,]* Senketsu sighed. He sounded very tired all of a sudden, so they didn't mention that anymore.

"I can't believe it, next time I see Ryuko she's gonna be a mom! And I've still got all these presents I never got a chance to give her, since she never had a baby shower or anything like that. She never really did get used to it," Mako said.

*[Did you expect her to?]* Senketsu asked, amused.

"Oh nah, not really. Oh! Do you think I should bring them now?" Mako pushed off the countertop, "They're not wrapped or anything but -"

*[-No, Mako.]*

And Tonbo said, *[Mako, we've got to stay focused on the task at hand.]*

*[Exactly, thank you Tonbo-]*

*[-Let's pick out the sauces we want, and then we can go get the presents!]*

"Right, right!" Mako smacked her forehead. "Thanks Tonbo, what am I thinking?"

~~~~~

4:40 am

~~~~~

Not since the coming of electric lights had Tokyo been so perfectly dark. With the human population retreated into the disaster shelters, it was a colossal shadow, the ribs of some long-dead leviathan poking into the stars. The streets were given over to the animals. Stray dogs and cats, birds and rats scurried around furtively. They scrounged for food, hunted one another, roosted on eggs or groomed their young; they went about their lives with no inkling as to how close annihilation was. But when a cold sun rose from the north, reflecting dancing rainbow light off the glass skyscrapers, even the animals ran for whatever safety they could find.

Minazuki slowed her approach as she entered the residential outskirts of Tokyo. The lab was nowhere near the city center, she could see it off to the right as a tiny red dot between some apartment buildings. But she skirted around it, drifting low so the skyline would cover her approach, and began an approach arc that would take her in from the southeast. No doubt, the Research Complex was well armed and its ordinance could make for an irritating delay if she made herself an obvious target, but more than that this was the enemy's home turf. Jakuzure was close. Ranketsu had passed on the knowledge that she was minorly injured before it ceased communications. Would that be enough to impede her? Probably not. And no, Jakuzure was not strong enough to bring her down, but she had an instinctive aversion to the thought of fighting her. The other kamui had proved stronger, more crafty, and more persistent than she had anticipated and Saiban had devoured Rosuketsu - it would be on another level. It paid to be cautious.

These were the calculations which preoccupied Minazuki as she passed through a city center area on the northwest side of Tokyo. Office buildings and department stores crowded her and she banked along the path of the railway. Her inhuman senses were tuned to their maximum perceptiveness, searching for an ambush. Even so, she nearly missed it. Only a slight shift in the air above her gave her a distinct impression that, *Something's not right*.

She turned just in time. A short young man with long chesnut hair and wide eyes had plunged off the roof of a building behind her. He unmistakably wore a kamui, a suit of sleek armor for his arms and legs that left his chest bare along with a helmet with a tinted visor, with yellow eyes like vortices embedded on its shoulder plates. They bored into her with the same intensity his had. The entire outfit, though mostly a dull grey, shone and flickered as it reflected her light. Millions of microscopic scales, their edges blurring with the reflections off the glass windows behind him. Minazuki saw in her peripheral vision the glinting edges of two red blades converging on her neck.

She reacted quickly. With a snarl of annoyance she twisted her body around so she flew with her back facing the street and stabbed at his belly. He looked like he'd seen this coming, but the speed and ferocity of her counterattack would have been too much for him nevertheless if Minazuki's rainbow light hadn't caught the cloak that fluttered behind him. A burst of light, pure white and much, much brighter than the source reflected off, lighting the entire city skyline to daytime levels. "Agh!" Minazuki grunted, completely blinded. Her strike faltered and she dove out of the way heedlessly to avoid the killing blow towards her neck. As she did, a kick landed on her stomach and sent her rocketing down to the ground. The shockwave crunched everything on the street. Cars blew away in clouds of scrap metal, trees and benches and garbage cans were ripped from the pavement, and the glass windows for dozens of blocks around shattered into a hurricane of glittering shards. But Minazuki managed to reassert herself and land on her feet, ready for a counterattack.

It didn't come. Mataro had retreated, and now was crouched low behind a concrete railing on the platform of a nearby monorail station. His chest was already heaving with exertion and terror, and he had to resist the temptation to bite down on the booster pill in his cheek right away. [*Holy shit she's fast!*] Wakaiketsu said.

Minazuki paused, scanning around for any sign of him. Nothing. She couldn't continue on her way now, or that would just happen again. "Hmph! The street-rat prince!" She called out disdainfully, "So they've sent you after me next! Why can't I sense your presence, hmm?"

No response. Instead Mataro hissed to himself, "Fuckin' hell Ryuko! You sold me out here!"

[*Mataro, keep it cool!*]

"It's not that! She's fast, yeah, but -" He literally could not resist it, he peeked his head over the concrete wall. Luckily the street, covered with rubble and surrounded by thousands of windows, was replete with potential hiding spots and Minazuki had not yet spotted the pair of big eyes mooning at a child's height from an above-ground monorail station halfway down the block. "Ryuko said she wouldn't be *this* hot!"

Wakaiketsu snickered, [*Pfft! You're kidding! You are kidding, right?*]

"Yeah, mostly. But lookit her! I mean, I guess Ryuko was defending her wife's looks, can't blame her for that, but *god damn!* Those *tits!*"

[*She's covered in blood!*] Wakaiketsu said, equally amused and incredulous.

“I know, that’s kinda sexy too. And the way her dress is ripped shows a bit of her hips too and, ugh! What a waste!” That seemed to have lifted Wakaiketsu’s spirits, which he’d hoped it would, but he was quite sincere too. He didn’t even consciously decide he was going to call out just then, but the words came to him automatically. “Hey baby! You sure we’ve got to do this? ‘Cuz, I’ve got this place not far from here - penthouse suite! We could enjoy the view, have a drink, and - Uh-oh!”

Minazuki immediately lunged at him. “That was Kiryuin property!” She shouted as she slashed the support stilts right out from under the train station in one savage swing, “Which you stole, you cretin!”

She forded into the collapsing rubble, reaching out with her extending fingers to try to find Mataro. He’d started running the moment he started shouting however, zooming off on silent, padded feet.

“That was a joke, by the way.” Minazuki turned. There he was behind her, standing on top of a busted car in the middle of the street. He pointed his sword at her. Just the one. Long and ruby red, two halves coming together into a narrow teardrop shape with two wide loops instead of a hilt, still steaming as the heat of battle burned the last vestiges of seawater off of it. Minazuki had herself never seen it before, but it was unmistakable.

The Scissor Blades.

“You’re making me miss the birth of my niece,” Mataro said, “I’m going to kill you.”

# Part Eight of the Great Battle for the Future

## Chapter Summary

Lengthy combat scenes are very difficult to write. I think with only a few exceptions I'll leave more to the imagination in part 3 and beyond. Anyway I hope it's cool.

October 2068

~~~~~

4:25 am

~~~~~

“Oh, for fuck’s *sake* !” Uzu was breathing heavily. He was standing on the corpse of a huge hybridized shark that had crawled into the ruined town on its well-muscled flippers. Its head was now a few blocks away. But there were ten more groaning their way down the flooded streets, eyes lolling uselessly. They were drawn to his aura, dragged to their doom by bloodlust. He clenched his sword, summoned strength from who knows where into aching legs, and then sprung. The first eight he killed without trouble - cutting their heads off, stabbing out their brains, slicing them in half so blood gushed from their gills. The life-fibers Seijitsu drank from them were enough to keep them going, but only just. He was slower, measurably. As he butchered the ninth, a shadow fell over him and the wide, stinking mouth of the tenth descended around him. Seijitsu’s shields were fine, that wasn’t going to kill Uzu, but still. He rolled his eyes, “Gimme a break.”

Then the shark lifted up, caught beneath a much larger shadow. Ira had its tail pinched between his thumb and forefinger and wasted no time flicking it off to the horizon. “Thanks,” Uzu shrugged, before leaping on to the next fight against some REVOCS troopers fording their way ashore.

Ira was hot on his heels, but was equally tired. As much as it infuriated him that since Minazuki arrived a clear victory had melted away, he was so concerned for Mako and for Ryuko that he would have preferred to just let them ashore. Were that an option. They didn’t need to discuss that, however, **“Think we should call the army back?”**

“I guess,” Uzu said. He lazily cut through the hordes of low ranking troopers, but then had to fall back before a tougher three-star and let Ira stomp them. “How long will that take?”

*[Too long.]*

Uzu and Ira froze. “Did you just-”

**“Yeah!”** They both snapped to alertness immediately. Basically ignoring the REVOCS soldiers (at this point they were too occupied attempting to make landfall anyway) Uzu leapt into the air and with a couple flaps of Seijitsu’s wings was floating behind Ira, back to back. They held their swords at the ready, searching for the source of the strange telepathic voice.

*[It's another kamui!]* Seijitsu exclaimed, *[It has to be!]* That only hardened their resolve.

“It’s not one of us, then.”

Ira roared, **“Show yourself!”**

The voice quickly came back, very sheepishly this time. *[Wait! I didn't mean to startle you. I'm here to help. It's... me. Senketsu!]*

**“What!”** Ira responded with immediate incredulity. **“That’s insane! We won’t fall for any more REVOCS tricks!”**

*[No no, it's true, it's true!]* Senketsu replied quickly, *[I've come out of hiding to help Ryuko! Until tonight, I've tried not to let the enemy know I'm still alive, but the situation has forced my hand!]*

Ira slowly tilted his huge head towards Uzu and gave him a skeptical glance. Uzu rubbed his chin. Neither of them had ever heard Senketsu's voice before, but this did sound like how Ryuko described it. “If you’re really Senketsu, then...”

Ira got what Uzu was getting at, and came up with something faster than him, **“Then, what was the song that Mako sang in my car when I picked you guys up that time?”**

*[... No...]* Senketsu was aghast.

**“What, you don’t remember?”** Ira asked with a grin. Just from that reaction, he and Uzu were both greatly reassured. Seijitsu whispered a string of overexcited swears, and Tekketsu and Ira felt a chill go through them. **“I’m sure Ryuko does.”**

*[I do, I do but... I'm not going to sing it!]*

**“Then how am I supposed to know that you know? And if you don’t, then how am I supposed to believe that you’re who you say you are?”**

*[I could tell you... how about a Mankanshoku family secret recipe? Maybe Ryuko's favorite song back then? How about the first time that Mrs. Mankanshoku washed me and I thought she was trying to kill me?]* Senketsu offered desperately.

**“Pssh, anyone could know that! That’s all practically common knowledge,”** Ira called out to the sky.

*[I'm still not going to sing it. You can't make me!]*

Uzu got in on it, shouting, “But now I want to hear it!”

*[Me too!]* Seijitsu chimed in.

*[Fine, then I'm just going to do what I came here for in the first place! I only made contact so that you wouldn't be startled, anyway.]* Senketsu grumbled. *[Can I just do the first line?]*

It was a very Ryuko-like reaction, and Ira responded as he would have if it was Ryuko. **“Sing it!”**

After a pause and a long, heavy sigh, Senketsu said in a terse monotone, *[We're all going on a ride-y ride to hell.]* Uzu and Seijitsu guffawed loudly. *[Is that enough? Can we talk?]*

**“You missed the ‘hey’.”**

*[Oh come on! That’s on the end, it barely counts!]*

**“Not so, the heys actually are first. There’s one at the start,”** Then he said to Uzu, **“Yeah, it’s him.”**

“Yeah, we got that. Shit, that’s good, isn’t it?”

*[You know, Mako really has rubbed off on you, Gamagoori,] Senketsu grumbled, [I don’t like it. Congratulations on your engagement though.]*

Ira rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, **“Oh. Thank you. How did you-”**

*[- I’m talking to her, too. And Ryuko as well.]*

**“I see.”**

“So you’re not like, back back?” Uzu said, “You’re kind of just a disembodied voice?”

*[A ghost!]* Seijitsu added unhelpfully.

*[That’s not all I can do,] Senketsu said, now back to his normal enthusiasm. [I said I was here to help, and that’s what I’m going to do. You see, over the years I’ve been learning to use Shinra Koketsu’s power - to seize control over the life-fiber network - and tonight is the night I reveal it to the world!]*

“Seriously? Wha- so does that mean you can stop Minazuki?” Uzu asked the air.

*[Ah. Well. She has too much human in her to be controlled. But I can solve your problem here.]*

The REVOCS troops were eagerly coming ashore now, their surviving battleships fanning out to open areas and disgorging landing craft. A little more than half of their forces were lying dead in the water, a graveyard of sinking hulks. In any ordinary war, such losses would have been so catastrophic that nothing could motivate the survivors to carry on. But REVOCS was not like any other army. Now that Minazuki was there, they would move forward unto death. The chosen few who caught up with her, who got to see her kill Ryuko (as they were sure she would) would receive an unimaginable reward. They were mostly ignoring Ira and Uzu now, but there was still no time to lose. *[In fact, let me go ahead and do this now!]*

**“SHINRA SENKETSU!”**

None of them knew what to expect, but it wasn’t this. Senketsu’s voice echoed over the blasted landscape, not just a telepathic signal but real sound. And the sky tore open.

“AAAAAIEEEEE!” The screams of raw terror from the REVOCS soldiers were heart rending, even for those who had inflicted their fair share. From horizon to horizon, perfectly north-south, a line of fire erupted into existence and peeled apart with a noise like a huge drum crash. An eye, like those Ryuko had manifested from across dimensions but so, so much larger. Its multilayered iris stretched across the entire sky, red in the center and fading in rhombohedral rings to yellow. It

was shockingly similar to a real eye, fleshy, with thousands upon thousands of striations - so small on humans but now rendered as canyons in the sky. And the pupil was impossibly dark. Pure, soft magenta light spilled out from it, dying the air a beautiful shade. Uzu and Ira stared with open mouths, barely able to process what they were seeing. The REVOCS soldiers were frozen too, but for a completely different reason.

They couldn't move. As much as they strained, raging about and howling as they tried to run (not that there was anywhere to run, Senketsu's light had doused everything in an otherworldly presence). Their Ultima Uniforms were frozen. Some in mid-stride, some hovering in the air. Their hybrid beasts, which had been drawn irresistibly inland, now stood still as well. They actually looked rather calm, as the life-fibers that directly their overgrown forms suddenly pumped soothing hormones throughout them. The whole army had been halted in place, and there they would remain.

**“Attention, followers of Ragyo! I am Kamui Senketsu. This battle is over! You have lost!”**

There was nothing Ira and Uzu could do but gape. This felt like something out of a dream, as though the moment Senketsu's eye opened they had fallen into a fantasy world. But it didn't go away. It just stayed like that, the entire REVOCS force a still-life. “Pff - wha - I don't - It's just over?” Uzu nearly laughed. “Seijitsu, isn't this just like... poof! Wish granted?”

*[Yeah! I wanted so bad for them to just **stop**, and now all of a sudden it's all over! We don't get to do it ourselves now, but let's face it we weren't gonna.]*

“Oh yeah? Well if anyone asks, they can't prove anything,” Uzu chuckled.

Ira sat down with a huge thud, and then his *Kyojin* form began to contract. It went molten and runny, starting at the seams, and then came together into a huge, floating ball of orange liquid stone that shrunk in pulses until it had entirely vanished and there was only Ira and Tekketsu, in the flesh and fabric. Ira sat down again, on a pillar of stone that was all that remained of the seawall.

“Senketsu... that level of power is beyond anything I imagined,” He felt his left forearm, which was all in one piece. “Minazuki seemed to think that Ryuko could pose a legitimate threat to the life-fibers, not just on Earth but across the universe. I'm starting to think she's right.”

Uzu landed next to Ira, “Hey, what do you look so down for? Isn't this awesome!”

“I feel weird, man. What were we so worried about, anyway?”

It took him a few moments to get around to it, but eventually Uzu reached up to his earpiece and cycled through the channels. “Hey, admiral?” He said, “... I'm good, yeah... listen, could you turn the ships around and come back up here... uh huh... actually, have the men ready to intake prisoners.”

~~~~~

4:41 am

~~~~~

Minazuki was not remotely intimidated by the sight of the scissor blades. She dashed back towards Mataro at top speed, and he grasped both handles and flung the scissors open. In the last few yards

Minazuki zig-zagged abruptly, much too fast for Mataro to see. He leapt back and she caught him in midair, just as he'd thought she would. In their first brief exchange he'd seen just how much faster her reactions were than his, and was beginning to get the measure of them. If he'd held his ground, even with Shingantsu he would not have known what direction the attack was coming from until too late for him to move. Instead he brought the blades together right at her waist height.

Of course it wouldn't be that easy. With a harshly resonant clang, the scissor blades were stopped each upon one side of her own, one-handed rendition of the weapon. They soared down the wide open road together, each straining against the other. Mataro's hands trembled and the scissor blades vibrated with pressure, but for all his effort Minazuki gradually opened her scissors and forced them apart. Mataro engaged his entire body, crunching her with a bear hug through the scissors, whereas Minazuki only had her forearm and fingers - though he could see that she at least needed to put in effort as her muscles flexed.

Their contest of strength didn't last long before they reached a T intersection and slammed right into a large department store. It buckled in and they smashed through every interior wall and out on the other side, and then *\*whoop!\** Mataro was gone. He dropped down into the alley behind the building and landed into a roll. Minazuki, still hovering several stories up, whipped around to try and spot him but only saw a blinding light below. She had no idea where he went.

Mataro had immediately busted through one of the loading docks behind the store and back into it. The heavy steel garage door shredded like tissue paper, but the impact of his every movement had torn up the alley so it was not obvious where he'd gone. Once inside, he immediately stopped and leapt right up through the garage ceiling. No time to hesitate, to question if he would be able to break through. It was as though the building itself was not there. His momentum was unimpeded as he crashed through not just one, or five, but fully eight floors. They just brushed off his face. Shredded pipes and reinforcing beams ripped like shrapnel through the structure, which began inexorably to collapse. It let out a groan that helped mask the noise Mataro was making and once he was again on Minazuki's level. Wakaiketsu engaged her thrusters and blasted them back out, scissor blades at the ready.

Wide-eyed shock from Minazuki was not enough to stop her from retaliating. She saw him coming just fast enough to parry, so instead of going for a scissor cut he kept the blades closed and, holding them with both hands on a single handle, used them as a conventional sword to land a precise thrust that slipped right by her parry and cracked her skull like a teacup. Once the scissors were well embedded in her skull, he opened them and in a fountain of gore ripped her head, shoulder, and upper torso apart. The halves flopped open lazily, unleashing a geyser of boiling hot blood. Mataro was ready for that - he had studied her previous fights with Nonon and Yuda via satellite cameras - and dashed away to land on a nearby rooftop.

*That surprised her!* Mataro thought gleefully, *This can work!*

Indignant rage boiled in Minazuki's eyes even before they were knit back together. Mataro watched her regenerate, sizing her up and ready for her next move. "You little pest!" She hissed at him.

Naturally, he taunted her, "Don't blame me! I sure don't wanna wreck such a pretty face!" He produced a glittering diamond from someplace - just moments ago it had been hanging in Minazuki's hair. He grinned as he rolled it between his fingers, "Hey, this is pretty fine!" He called, "You could buy half of Honnou-town for this! Why'd you wear so much jewelry for a battle, anyway?"



“How did you -”

Mataro just grinned, but then Minazuki reached out with her left hand. “Oh shit!” He shouted, springing away in a burst of light as her fingers lanced out at him, all five together trailing a wide umbrella of sizzling red droplets. They pulverized the building where he had stood and the blood left black singe-marks all across the rubble. But once again he was gone, dull grey kamui fading into the shadows. This time there was no verbal taunting, and she wouldn’t have heard anyway because the department store fully collapsed and made a mighty rumbling as it did. Amidst the dust cloud now billowing around her, Minazuki had no chance of following him.

*Forget him, then. He won’t stand and fight and can’t match my speed. I’ll just be on my way.* She began to drift up, wary of any sudden ambushes. Something small cracked through the air like a bullet, heading right for her. She whirled around and batted it down with her sword. It was the diamond, thrown with the strength of a kamui. Minazuki immediately deduced exactly where it had been thrown from. Through the dust cloud, across the street. She dithered, however. Mataro had to have known that wouldn’t hurt her, so he was likely waiting just to the side to strike when she dashed in. *That’s clearly how he thinks. Let’s end this quickly.* She dashed over the rubble and landed on the street, quick and silent, barely ruffling the dust clouds.

And then she was hit by a truck.

Mataro was nowhere near where he’d thrown the diamond, having dashed down the street until he found a projectile that could do some real damage. He heaved the truck up by the rear bumper, tossed it into the air and jumped up to catch it by a pipe on the bottom, then hurled it horizontal like a javelin. It blasted a hole through the dust cloud and hit Minazuki with exactly as much force as should be expected. She wasn’t caught completely by surprise, for it made a roaring boom as it broke the sound barrier and she turned to face it, but it presented such a wide target racing towards her so fast that she couldn’t dodge in time. Instead she sliced up through the engine block, cutting it in half with contemptuous ease. It parted on either side of her.

But she was still clobbered by the roof of the driver’s compartment coming up behind it. Even the sturdiest truck couldn’t possibly handle being thrown with such force and it was already coming apart before it even hit. Rather than a solid projectile it was more like a cone of debris shattering all around her. Cutting the engine block didn’t mean much when there was another slab of steel hurtling right behind it. The spinning red roof sent her tumbling down the street, and Mataro was right on her heels, jumping above the cloud of truck parts and descending on her, scissors wide. Abraded into a bloody smear across the asphalt though she was, Minazuki’s death grip on her sword remained and the moment she spotted him she was on her feet - still partially regenerating - and ready for his attack.

Now the fight began in earnest. Swords clashed dozens of times each second as they whirled around each other in the devastated street. With Minazuki’s rainbow glow reflecting back double-strength from Wakaiketsu, everything beyond them was invisible, washed out by the light. Capitalizing on the slowness that came from regeneration - chunks of Minazuki’s torso were still reforming and one of her feet was just a stump - Mataro pressed the attack. He snapped the scissors at her to no avail as she fell back, parrying one side or the other, then switched tactics and tried to find an opening using the scissor blades together as a conventional sword. *How was anyone meant to use these?* He wondered in the back of his mind. Snapping them together had great reach and made Minazuki rightly skittish about approaching him, but it felt unwieldy. He couldn’t figure out how he was meant to block like that. *It must have just made intuitive sense to Ryuko, after all she killed Ragyo with it.*

He may have been trained in the Nudist Beach way to fight a stronger opponent, but he quickly learned that this was not enough. When Minazuki parried she wasn't merely putting metal between herself and a deadly blow; it was an immovable wall. She pushed back, he could feel an impossible strength raging from one sword to another that told him to back off, now. If he let her, just by raising her arm she could have thrown him away. *I'm not going to win this one*, he realized. He should have had some instinctive inkling of where his opening would be through Shingantsu, but nothing came. And then Minazuki managed to bash off one of his swings and go in for a counterattack, and it was all he could do to intuit how not to die in the next millisecond.

Any kamui but Wakaiketsu, if they were so young and relatively weak, would have been unable to save their wearer then. Shingantsu gave Mataro that warning he needed to not hesitate, even for a second, and that saved him from being run through immediately. But even knowing every attack, staying in a protracted fight with Minazuki would have been a no-win scenario. Battered down and exhausted, eventually all he could have done was see his death approaching. But Minazuki had a hard time hitting him. His cloak was almost impossible to look directly at, and though slower than her he still darted around too fast for the eye to follow. And with her presence untraceable, that was the only method she had. As they zig-zagged around the empty streets, Minazuki time and again swung and met only empty air. She kept him on the run though, and now that there was some distance between them he couldn't do more than tag her with a scissor-tip or else she'd cut him when he got too close.

*[Time to go!]* Wakaiketsu spied a conveniently branching alley and Mataro dipped into it. Suddenly darkness fell on the street once more, leaving Minazuki blinking.

The entire neighborhood was devastated. In their private world of glorious battle, all the terrain around had become meaningless. There wasn't a single building in sight with an intact window, and most of them had huge holes where one or both of them had leapt through or were sliced in two by the shockwave from a particularly powerful swing. The street had huge scars in it, and all the light poles, trees, and cars were in ruins. They had even caved in the huge columns of the above-ground rail line at some point, not that either of them had noticed. Mercifully, there were no fires, as the city's electrical grid was shut down leaving broken wires inert and harmless. Minazuki cared not, but she was alone. Mataro had proven he wouldn't just let her leave. So she flew down into the alley, in the way she thought Mataro had gone.

This entire engagement, their first encounter, had lasted a matter of seconds. Blink and you'd miss it.

~~~~~  
5:02 am  
~~~~~

"So tell me about yourself!" Mataro yelled. Minazuki busted through the wall after him, and he parried a couple of her attacks before sliding around a corner, into a bathroom, and then through another wall and she'd lost him again. They were in an office building, all winding corridors and cubicle mazes. It was an environment that worked to Mataro's benefit; it was easy to be close to Minazuki and yet completely invisible to her. In a matter of seconds it would all be rubble as their trail of destruction claimed it, but he would just move on to the next.

"What's your cup size?" Calling out to her of course told her where he was, but only right then and there. She moved right to the source only to see him already escaping. Keep her chasing where he

was, and she spent less time thinking about where he was *going* . No different from the enforcers back at Honnouji. Plus, it kept him busy. Better to be thinking of his next taunt than wondering demoralizing things. Don't think about how long this had been going on (not long enough), or where they were (hopefully not too close to the lab), or how much more he could endure (yeah, definitely don't think about that).

Minazuki came through the wall right in front of him, into a wide hallway with floor to ceiling windows on one side. She halted instantly with her back straight and her sword in a fencing guard, poised as though she had no momentum at all. Mataro skirted back, making sure to press his feet into the ground hard so that when she slashed at him, the shock rocked through him and something cracked below. This building was reaching its limit. Wakaiketsu's foot pads were soft and silent and he got a good feel for the instability of the ground through them. "Gotta be at least triple-Ds I think!" He shouted as they fought. "Gs? God, could it be?"

*\*Crack!\** A support beam snapped as Mataro blocked one last slice with the closed scissor blades and suddenly the floor ripped away. It plunged down, smashing through dozens of floors which the two of them had already wrecked, and they rode with it. With each layer, the hole they were carving into the side of the building grew larger in a domino effect. Dust and glass flew everywhere.

Minazuki as ever looked sublimely annoyed with Mataro's ability to cause diversions. He on the other hand smiled - trying not to let her see how much trouble he had keeping balance - and said, "Hey, don't look at me like that!" Their swords crashed together dozens of times as their falling platform tilted this way and that and was showered in broken glass. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about if it's smaller, you can tell me!"

The floor they rode cracked in two, finally hitting a level where the structure wasn't fully compromised. Instead of tearing right through the level below the two sides punched a small hole in it and then folded in towards each other. On either side, Mataro and Minazuki were flung right at each other as the two sides sandwiched them. Time to go. Mataro leapt up to the top of his side, tilting it back like a seesaw with the hope of dropping through the gap between the broken piece of floor and what was left of the ceiling. Minazuki wasn't going to let him escape like that. She reached out with her left hand, stretching each finger to hook it around the edges of the floor platform and then pulling it back towards her and her waiting sword. "Whoa!" Time to change strategies. Mataro dropped down, landing hard on his back and sliding down the floor, blocking stabs from Minazuki as he did. Before her eyes he had plunged into the dark corridor on the level below and was gone once again.

Of course, Minazuki followed. She drifted down into the next level, illuminating the hallways. They had only briefly passed through this area before, and a pile of rubble surrounding holes in the floor and ceiling in one of the larger cubicle mazes showed that. The building shook and groaned as the floors above collapsed. Searching for Mataro meant a sudden blitz of nearly instantaneous movement as she flitted from one intersection to another, quickly scanning down every hall with the corners of her supersensitive eyes. In less than a second she systematically covered the entire level, leaving behind her a chaotic tangle of trailing rainbow light. No sign of him.

"I'm serious! Sorry if I guessed too high, I dunno how to tell! When I asked Ryuko, she hit me!" Ah, he had already gone down to the next level. In a flash Minazuki leapt to the exact point when she heard his voice. She stabbed right through the floor like a comet, caving in a huge crater and arriving on a fresh pile of rubble in yet another dark, empty expanse of cubicles. No Mataro here either, not even fleeing in the distance. Odd, but she hadn't been mistaken. She was about to scan

this floor too when she heard a leering giggle from above her. She jerked her head up, and there was Mataro. Or rather, just his face, staring at her from amidst the ceiling tiles and fluorescent light fixtures with a big, lecherous smile creasing his face. And it wasn't exactly *her* he was staring at. Minazuki allowed herself a disgusted twitch. "What?" Mataro asked, worming his way halfway out of the ceiling, "You're the one who picked that outfit!" And then they both attacked.

Minazuki leapt at Mataro, but Wakaiketsu fired her thrusters and he pushed off the ceiling with scissor blades snapping. This time his momentum won out, carrying them both through the floor and out into open air. That had been the last level before hitting the building's main atrium, a wide open glass chamber with shops, restaurants, and fountains on the ground floor and on various mezzanines. Mataro and Minazuki fought as they fell, zipping through the air with pinpoint thruster boosts and Minazuki's effortless levitation. "I was wondering, don't they get in the way?" Mataro shouted with a mischievous grin and dashed off to Minazuki's left, spinning around her counterclockwise. To parry the snapping scissor blades she now had to reach over her own breasts and it slowed her just enough that Mataro kept on the offensive until they landed. Amid scattering tables and chairs he leapt back in to try that move again, but this time she braved the scissors to try an attack with her extending fingers. Mataro snapped at them over and over, trying to sever them, but they were telephone wires in a hurricane. Their wiggling and snapping was so rapid that he couldn't catch them - all the worse because they let out a stinging spray of blood - then one of them nearly snagged his leg which forced him back.

Mataro vaulted back behind one of the wide brick columns that supported the first floor mezzanine. *[No good!]* Wakaiketsu warned, and she was right. "Whoa!" Mataro jumped nearly to the ceiling right as Minazuki sliced right through the column at just the height to behead him if he'd stayed at ground level. She barrelled through the collapsing brick, and Mataro barely managed to defend. Her attacks were a sheer whirlwind and varied too, short flicks and vicious full-arm slashes, stabs and scissor snaps. "Fuck, fuck, fuck! Chill!" He couldn't think up any witty retorts then.

Mataro fell back into one of the fast food joints on the ground floor and over the countertop, and then once he was back in the kitchen at last managed to slip away from Minazuki once again by bursting through the wall, then back, then out again, giving her three wide craters in the walls and no clue which of them he'd left through. After that, he had a moment of respite to catch his breath in a maintenance hall. All solid concrete, no sign of Minazuki anywhere.

At least, that's what he thought. He felt a slight disturbance in the air as a crack in the wall was suddenly cut off, and looked over. The crack seemed to have gotten thicker, expanding. He didn't have to wait long to see why, as in one smooth motion Minazuki - having compressed her body into a flat plane as she had to escape the RAW bomb - emerged from it and like an optical illusion immediately returned to three-dimensionality. Last to arrive was her sword, which was also able to fold razor flat, although it more visibly unfurled to normal with a metallic whirl of moving parts. "Agh!" Mataro yelped involuntarily. Minazuki hadn't spotted him in the gloom at first, but she did then and turned with a predatory snap of her head. Mataro threw up his cloak, reflected blinding light down the hallway, and ran again.

In the back hallways where the building's heat and plumbing and electricity were routed, Mataro found plenty of corridors which had partially collapsed, and even scrambled his way through the piles of debris that choked them a few times to make his route less obvious. When he reached the edge of the building at last, he dug the scissor blade into the wall and dragged it furiously through the wall, ceiling, and floor. The building groaned and gave way and another solid mound of rubble

poured down from the ruptured ceiling, blocking the hall behind him. Then he exited through a back door and sprinted down into an alley.

That should have been far enough. But Wakaiketsu could still sense Minazuki, and she was very close. *[Is she getting better at tracking us? Or is that just me?]*. Mataro rubbed his face. *Right, shit, she can slip through walls too . How the fuck am I still alive?* He wondered. His heart was hammering in his chest, both from terror and desperate rage. However long it had been, and Minazuki was completely unruffled. Like a robot. *Is there anything I can do to crack her?* It reminded him of Satsuki the day she inducted him into the Kamui Corps. *I just want to hit her! Just once, I want to see her hurt!*

Just like then, he wouldn't give up on trying to hurt her. Either with his sword or with his words. He started running again and shouted, "C'mon baby, why won'cha talk to me!" If he could seem unfazed, like this wasn't so hard for him, maybe that would annoy her. Again, Minazuki was hot on his heels, flying up over the buildings and diving down on him. He managed to give her the slip quickly thanks to a lucky guess on what her opening strike would be - a lancing thrust - he kicked her arm at the wrist and vanished into a window.

Their cat-and-mouse game continued through a row of apartment buildings and townhouses. "You've still got some human in ya! I saw you talking with my sister! You can pretend the life-fibers moved you to another plane and you've got nothing to say to anyone, but I know better!" Minazuki nearly killed him almost once-per-word, but he managed to stay one step ahead of her, dancing across kitchens and bedrooms and up and down floors. Photographs, pots and pans, toothbrushes, teddy bears, the debris of people's lives was kicked up into a maelstrom. Mataro didn't process any of that. It was all sheer geometry, walls and floors to put between him and Minazuki.

He burst out onto the street and whirled around, ready for her to chase her. Instead, the foundations of the building cracked, and suddenly its facade was racing towards him. Minazuki had hurled the entire thing at him. "Oh god!" He quickly blurted as he dashed out of the way. But Shingantsu warned him just in time that Minazuki was about to attack. She burst through the building, a battering ram - all those tons of concrete were just a smokescreen for her real attack. Mataro spun around and blocked her attack, but she kept the pressure on and as he backed up the street, a shadow fell over them. The collapsing building was falling on top of them.

*[Aaah! What do we do!]* Wakaiketsu darted her eyes around desperately for an escape route as Mataro fought. Minazuki dashed around him, making use of her superior speed to keep him from running. He tried to blind her, but she just swiveled around him so the light was no longer beaming into her eyes. She looked gleeful, full of vindictive triumph. If Mataro was pinned under the rubble, even momentarily, she would have him at her mercy. The rumbling noise of the collapsing building was deafening, instilling frantic urgency onto Wakaiketsu as the ceiling closed in. *[No manholes!]* Wakaiketsu concluded, *[There's only one way! Up!]* She picked a window above them at an angle Mataro would be able to easily jump to. *[Now! Go go go!]* Mataro leapt, crashing through the glass and into the building. It was only fifty or so feet above the ground, and the apartment they found themselves in tilted almost ninety degrees. They didn't have time to appreciate the way that it plummeted around them like a tunnel. Mataro kicked off the wall and launched into a mad climb, shimmying through doorways and scrambling up walls. Nevermind Minazuki, now his sole goal was to escape being buried and hope she wasn't expecting this move. He had nearly reached the other side of the building when it struck the ground and the vibration rattled through it. He braced against it, digging the scissoring into one side of a narrow hallway and planting his feet on the other. The building groaned and below him walls and floor ripped apart,

but miraculously the core frame of the apartment tower stayed in a roughly rectangular shape. He had a moment to catch his breath, and appreciate that yet again, somehow, he wasn't dead.

Minazuki was floating above, scanning for any sign of him. Mataro only knew that by feeling her presence and from the faint light filtering through the dust from a window nearby. For her, the dust clouds were too thick to see much of anything. As Mataro panted for breath, he sucked in large quantities of it and suddenly his lungs were burning. *No no no! Don't cough!* He clamped his mouth shut and fought back the itching in his throat. It felt like he was choking himself.

Uzu had taught Mataro, during Shingantsu training, to acknowledge all the discomforts of battle and then push through them. To get his mind off his lungs, he passed on to allowing himself to feel the soreness in his body. It was a distressing experience. He realized the heavy toll that withstanding hundreds, maybe thousands of Minazuki's strikes had taken on his body. The shock of so much force rattling through him was taking a toll, his muscles twinged with every move. If it got much worse a moment would come when his arm would fail to move, maybe only for a fraction of a second. That was all it took. *Fuck, what time is it?* Mataro wondered. He had a sinking feeling it hadn't been nearly long enough. *Ryuko might still come! At any moment, she could be here!* He couldn't imagine how he could kill Minazuki now, though he also couldn't admit that to himself. *Until she does, I don't have any way out of here.* The urge to swallow his booster pill was stronger than ever.

Minazuki zoomed over to the base of the building, where its feet lay prone right by the edge of its former foundations. She had deduced that he must have remained inside the building itself, and now would flush him out. Without so much as a grunt of exertion, she accelerated from a hover to maximum speed directly into the ground floor of the building. The sheer velocity of her passage shattered it systematically, ripping the entire building into pieces. Mataro heard all this just in time. *[Crap! She's onto us!]* Mataro jumped into the air, clearing the apartment tower only to watch as it ballooned and fragmented, rainbow light blasting what started as hairline cracks into hundreds of yards of open space. Carried by her momentum, most of the rubble flew in an arc across the street and into the cityscape beyond. Huge chunks of masonry crashed to the earth, plunging right through buildings and cratering into the streets. They screamed like dive-bombing planes as they fell, striking gas lines and producing glorious, fiery explosions. It was breathtaking.

There was no time to take in the scene, however. Minazuki burst out from the roof and immediately pivoted towards Mataro. She had spotted him already. *She spotted me already!* Mataro couldn't believe it. He dashed towards street level, but Minazuki was faster. He threw up his cloak, reflected light off the scale-like armor on his arms right into her eyes, but Minazuki confidently barrelled through, swinging her sword in a blind whirlwind. It was so fast Mataro couldn't process it, and there was simply no opening to exploit. All he could do was hold up the scissor blades and let Minazuki's attacks *\*Clang-Clang-Clang\** off it.

They crashed together into a monorail line. The solid central beam bent, ripping off its struts into a u-shaped curve but not quite touching the ground. Mataro's back was pressed into it, contorting it and nearly knocking the wind out of him. His heart jumped in his throat. Minazuki loomed over him, pinning him in place. Her rainbow light reflecting off Wakaiketsu at such close proximity sizzled the air. A cauldron of light. But she squinted through it, grimacing, and even with his visor Mataro could only see the vague shadow of her silhouette. Blood vaporizing in the air tinted her rainbow light demonic red. Mataro moved the booster pill in the corner of his mouth between his molars. He tried to slide away from Minazuki, redirecting stabs into the beam and desperately evading death. She wouldn't let him. Her left hand snaked out and at last grabbed him, wrapping around his left arm and yanking it up. He could no longer snap the scissor blades, but worse, her

blood seeped through the seams in Wakaiketsu's armor and onto Mataro's skin. It burned; it burned *so* much more than he could prepare for. "A-Aagh!" He screamed, feeling as if his flesh was melting down to the bone.

*[Now Mataro!]*

"What's wrong?" Minazuki crowed, "Your bag of tricks run dry?" She lifted her arm, jerking her elbow back past her ear. The tip of her sword angled right in front of Mataro's forehead, so close Mataro's eyes crossed looking at it. It stood out so vivid, that pearly sheen glinting softly in the blazing light.

"NOT EVEN!" Mataro shouted. He bit down on his booster pill and swallowed.

Raw force exploded from Wakaiketsu. Her eyes and Mataro's suddenly lit up, sharp and wide awake. Minazuki's hair and the hems of her dress whipped uncontrollably. She leaned back, eyebrows cocked. She couldn't see Wakaiketsu's aura, but she felt that this was more than just a disturbance in the air. Her power was billowing, shoving back against Minazuki. Like magnetic repulsion. "What the-!"

Mataro grinned. He'd expect the familiar feeling from before, of the drug seizing him. When he was just a lone human it was out of his control, a bit frightening. His brain seemed to skip along, a mountain bike skidding down a rocky trail, thoughts jumping around unable to keep up with what his body was instinctively doing. It was dissociative; he watched himself casually do things so audacious they felt like dreams afterward. But that wasn't what happened now. Or, maybe it was, he definitely sprung into action with a live wire running up his spine. Maybe having Wakaiketsu there helped share the mental load, there was no time to wonder. He just didn't feel out of control.

Actually, he felt pretty calm.

Minazuki tried to run Mataro through. Before her scissor blade made contact, Mataro's was in her gut. So much energy was racing through his body that the pain in his joints and from his burns was nothing to him. He was totally unhindered. He twisted the scissors deep and planted both his feet on her hips, then shoved with all his might. With wide, mortified eyes Minazuki hurtled off down the street, carving divots into the street and pinging off the buildings. It wasn't that she moved with anything less than her typical implacable brutality. Mataro just beat her to it. And he didn't miss a step now. His arms and legs arced with furious energy and he launched off the monorail beam after her, laughing.

*[Whoa-ho-ho! Alright! This is more like it!]* Wakaiketsu cheered. Minazuki righted herself, but Mataro was on her immediately. They collided in midair with a burst of dazzling light. Mataro snapped the scissors, then slashed with their outer edges, attack after attack and when she finally had an opening to counter he didn't run but parried obliquely. It slipped off, giving him the opportunity to rake the scissors across her face. One of her eyes was gouged out - only momentarily - and Mataro grabbed the corner of his cloak with a free hand and threw it up, sending a pristine shaft of white light right into her remaining eye.

"Geh!" Minazuki gasped, undignified and astonished, and dashed backwards. She had to. Fully blinded, she couldn't know where the killing scissor snap would come from. This was new, before she had the measure of him and of when she could press through his blinding techniques. *They're all so persistent! I don't understand!*

Mataro could tell that she saw him as more than a nuisance now. That was everything he could possibly want. “Ohhhhh! What’s wrong!” He jeered. Like before, he didn’t stand still to exchange banter. Only now instead of running away, he charged right at her.

Their battle continued, with Minazuki giving ground more often than not. She raced through the streets, zooming low and between cars and trees, trying to skirt behind Mataro and turn the tables. But even when she abruptly vanished around corners, Mataro was not far behind and more often than not he was continuing on the attack.

*[We can do this! Let’s go for it, now!]* Wakaiketsu was just as focused on Minazuki as Mataro now. No more searching around for escape routes, they didn’t need any. With all four of their eyes on her, it was as if they were zooming at her through a tunnel - nothing else was real. Mataro’s posture completely changed; he hunched low, nearly tripping over himself in his eagerness to get at her. Every stride or rebound off a building had the force of a rocket, obliterating the pavement and concrete beneath his feet. *[I had no idea there were so many of these overpasses and walkways!]* She had spent the battle barely escaping down alleys in a blur of panic. Now everything she’d missed stood out so clearly, and everything was a springboard to continue the attack, *[We’re so fast! This whole place is like a - a jungle gym!]* They crashed through balconies and pedestrian bridges, riding them down and dancing on the falling masonry with impeccable balance.

“So am I bad enough for you now? Huh!” Mataro yelled. He talked fast, not as fast as their swords clashed, and not fast enough that the words outran him like they used to. “You feel like chatting now?” Mataro could finally see all of what Minazuki was doing, analyze it. Her patterns, her preferred moves, her openings. At every moment he had to fight with everything he had or she’d take his head off, booster pill or no. But he was still learning, and just like Aikuro and Tsumugu had he began to spy some of her limitations. *I’m better than her! She’s physically better, but my skills are really, seriously better!* Pride surged through him, the killing blow was closer than ever. He needed to let her know this was easy for him. He didn’t have a reason, it was a wordless conviction, but it felt like breaking her icy veneer was key to winning.

“See! I knew you were still human in there! Look how you fight!” To accent his point he snagged Minazuki’s sword in between the scissor blades and twisted it around. Rather than counter attack with her free hand, Minazuki compulsively yanked her sword back and tried another thrust. Mataro laughed, tucking his hand behind his back like a fencer, the way Minazuki did. He parried Minazuki the way he’d seen Houka do, with nimble wrist flicks that barely worked using the cumbersome scissor blades. But it got Minazuki’s attention alright. Her eyebrows rose and her lips curled. “Deh! Deh! Deh! Hahahaaa! You must’ve learned to fight like that after Nonon cut off your arm, right? Now see if you really were so different than who you were, you’d use both your hands at once, wouldn’t ya?” Minazuki did indeed look perturbed, but it didn’t slow her fighting at all and she even managed to take ground from Mataro - nothing he couldn’t react to though. “Ohh, you must hate her, don’t you? You think you hate her more than Ryuko, or what?”

But she noticed that his focus slipped slightly when he spoke. She had no such limitation. “Hate! Why should I hate them? They are just my enemies!” Mataro didn’t have a ready rebuke to that. He drove her into a building, and unlike before when he would have vanished he chased her. Collapsing walls and flying furniture blocked her vision but he knew exactly where she was, and he danced between the room, dodging over and under her blind swings and landing a few light scrapes on her. But Minazuki was proud to consider herself more than human; she wouldn’t lose her cool even though Mataro took back the advantage. “That is simply the way of the universe! Would *you* hate a mosquito?”



“Pfft! Of course!” Mataro laughed. Minazuki leapt backwards, shunting her way through the rest of the building leaving behind a thin tunnel through the many inner walls. Mataro dashed after her, she cocked her sword back and slashed with all her might. The resulting shockwave carved right through the skyscraper (and one on either side).

Mataro burst through the collapsing rubble, from the floor above where she had sliced through the building. She lashed out with her fingers while he closed the distance, but he dodged and sliced his way through. Blood sizzled off Wakaiketsu’s armor, but he ignored the occasional drops that hit his skin. “And that is exactly wrong with humanity!” Minazuki yelled, “You waste your time rebelling against the basic facts of the world around you! You cannot accept that you are not the main character! That you are only tools, only fuel for your betters!”

“Oho what, we’re all bugs to you now?” Mataro laughed, battling Minazuki up and down the street. She moved with such fluid grace, and now was trying very hard to constantly move behind him, to keep his mind as occupied as possible. He assumed she was running scared. “We done way more damage to you than any *mos-qui-to* (each syllable was paired with a slash) has ever done to me!”

*[Right, left, right again - behind, now!]*

Mataro leapt into the air just as Minazuki materialized behind him, afterimage coalescing into a powerful thrust between his shoulder blades. He jumped with enough force to propel him dozens of stories into the air but then immediately fired thrusters straight down, noisily reversing all that force and landing right next to Minazuki. He dropped his finger right onto her hip, where her dress was shredded off and her skin was lacerated and oozing blood. It hissed and steamed against his glove. “*Yow ! Hot stuff!*” He waved his hand as though it had burned him (the glove was plenty heatproof), followed up by irrepressible, mad laughter.

Minazuki and he both jumped back from each other. She hadn’t gotten that close to him before, and as soon as she did she could tell there was something unusual about his pulse. It throbbed, fast and erratic in his wrists and neck. Her nostrils flared, and she sounded thoroughly disgusted when she said, “You - You’re on *drugs !*”

“Hahahohohooo! Guilty! As! Charged!” Adrenaline and the unnatural boost of energy were starting to have a serious effect on him now. He let them. He couldn’t believe he just did that. He could do it again! He could do anything!

“Rrgh!” Minazuki snarled, launching back in for the attack. Mataro ducked and dodged fluidly, feeling in the zone. Laughter forced itself from his chest. Like the plummets of a rollercoaster, each slash and stab he evaded was innately thrilling. Minazuki yelled, “And you wonder, you wonder why I would not *waste* my *time* talking to you! At least with the others there was even the slightest chance of them listening to reason!” They rocketed into a park, kicking up parallel furrows in the rich wet earth. The moment he stopped Mataro flattened himself into the bottom of his, then when Minazuki leapt over to continue fired his thrusters at full power and blasted into her like a spring. All the bushes and trees that weren’t uprooted were set on fire, as the afterburners ran wild with spikes of yellow flame.

*[W-whoa!]* Wakaiketsu hadn’t meant to put that much power into the leap - she hadn’t been able to before. *[Ohh, feel that? Hahahaha!]*

Mataro fought Minazuki vertically, driving her up above the skyline. “What, you really thought you’d turn my sister? Get real! She’s the most brickheaded of us all!”

“Ah, but for her, this is all about protecting Matoi!” Minazuki lectured him.

*[Feather touches!]* Wakaiketsu reminded herself in a thrilled hiss. She fired her thrusters in two short bursts, shooting out around Minazuki and then over her and behind her back. But Mataro got overzealous, and went for a snap of the scissor blades. That was a slow move, and Minazuki responded in time. She whirled around and blocked one side of the blades with her scissors, letting the other dig into her arm and past it into her chest.

“Someone like that *might* listen to the truth! But not you!” With blood exploding from her body, she kicked Mataro away. He was sent shooting across the sky, righting himself and hovering on the power of Wakaiketsu’s thrusters alone. Without the booster pills, they’d never managed to truly fly. Seeing the city sprawling below them was new. Even in its current state, it was beautiful. Wakaiketsu traced the path of destruction, of glittering broken glass and spreading fires winding in knots into the distance. They had come much further than she’d realized. They were close to the city center now, on ground that had been the old Kiryuin Conglomerate headquarters. The new government offices, the university campus, and the whole revived downtown built at Satsuki’s command and with hers and Ryuko’s fortune were all around them, some already burning. A miserable thing, but then this was what Minazuki would bring to the entire world if she wasn’t stopped. They could live with it

Minazuki kept yelling, “You are here for yourself! For your own glory!”

*Oh, come on!* Mataro was about to laugh that off, but Minazuki pressed on.

“Don’t try to deny it, your type is quite obvious!” Mataro got just a glimpse of the sheer unjustified arrogance of her old human self then. “One level below the elites, but if you can only defeat me, you’ll rise above even them! Then all the adoration, the money, all the women will be yours! Hahaha! You humans really are such simple minded creatures, to throw away your lives for such menial things!” She said, as smugly as was physically possible.

Mataro had to feel proud at that. Of course, he had considered what it would mean if he won, he wouldn’t deny wanting it. But not nearly as much as he wanted Ryuko and Nozomi to be okay. He would have liked to let Minazuki know he was better than she thought. But if she knew there was a ticking time bomb in his chest, then she would stall him out for time and he’d die for sure. *I’m probably going to die anyway*, he realized. Everything always stood out more clearly just before a battle; now he felt like he could see everything. The signs in all the storefronts below, every fleck of ash and tumbling scrap of trash. *This is where it’ll happen. After everywhere I’ve been, in the same old city where I was born.*

*[Shut up!]* Wakaiketsu snapped at him. *[Just enjoy the feeling. We’re going to win, I know it!]*

“You’re an idiot!” Mataro shouted at Minazuki, and then raced back in for another attack.

~~~~~

5:20 am

~~~~~

The booster pill lasted a distressingly short time. It didn’t feel that way to Mataro until it was up, though. He fought Minazuki on something close to equal footing up and down the streets of Tokyo. They got as far east as the Ara river, where she caved a tunnel in on him which gave her

about twenty seconds headstart turning back to the west. Then, their path bent south into the port, where Minazuki hoped that the open sky afforded by the low warehouses and shipping docks would give her the advantage in speed and sight. And it might have, if Mataro hadn't immediately (and unintentionally) plowed through a fuel silo, starting a huge fire that spread rapidly and choked the air with smoke, cutting off her vision just as the skyscrapers did.

Now, they were on Tsukishima island, where the urban lattice of Tokyo was in full effect. Generations of bridges, walkways, towering hotels and offices built upon one another, and the derelict old tenements below were falling down around them. The repeated clashing of hardened life-fibers produced shockwaves that blasted all the windows to shards; everything that wasn't cemented in place had long since been sent caterwauling down the streets. Even if Mataro and Minazuki weren't crashing through the buildings on their own, it would still look like a bomb had gone off just from all the debris of the street becoming essentially oversized shrapnel. It was a tangled, three-dimensional mess stretching up high into the sky, like a giant hoarder's closet.

The two were separated briefly after crashing through a building, when Mataro accidentally crashed into a structural column and ricocheted away. He exited the building headfirst but landed on his feet on a walkway (or at least what was left of one). Minazuki came out on the other side, and didn't spot him immediately. His head was already swimming; spinning through the air made him even dizzy but somehow it didn't seem to affect him. Which was something he noticed. And it amused him immensely.

"Haha *ha* !" His voice squeaked madly, flourishing the scissor blades, "Oh, I am really *doing* this!" He had no idea how long it had been now, the fighting at the port felt like forever ago. But why even bother remembering it? Every moment was better than the last. His thoughts were scattered, as were Wakaiketsu's, and memories and phrases popped in and out whenever he had even a split second not focused entirely on the flight. But one thing that kept coming back, rolling elegantly through his mind, was how Satsuki described her theory of kamui fighting. "*Kamijustu: the fighting form of gods*" . "Yeah, yeah that's it exactly! This is how it feels to be a *god* !"

*[Satsuki'll be so proud. They'll both be so proud of what we've done!]*

Minazuki wheeled around one of the tower peaks. She broke off her lazy arc immediately and zoomed right at him. Mataro knew instinctively exactly what she was going to do. Her scissor blade came down in a sweeping overhead arc and crashed right through the walkway, and he jumped out of the way at the last possible second. He laughed as he did, plunging towards her back.

"Having fun, are we?" Minazuki let him drive one side of the scissors into her shoulders, then whipped around with inhuman speed as though it wasn't even there. She pulled herself off the scissors before he could close them, not that he hadn't seen that coming. In fact, he had all of her moves down to instinct by now. But even so, he still couldn't kill her. In fact, constantly being right on the verge of killing her was the only way to keep her on the defensive, and keep himself alive. So he tried again, dashing right up into her face and bashing one hand into her wrist to stop her counterblow, then bringing the scissors down on her head like an axe. She let him split her face open with it one, twice, and then when Mataro lifted his hand to open the scissors - she seemed impaired enough - she swiped at him blindly while her skull reformed and forced him to block. Their fight continued, dashing through the air as the city

"Fun?" He screeched incredulously over the continuous high pitched whine of swords clashing at superhuman speeds - it sounded like a buzzsaw, and kicked up sparks just the same.

Minazuki grinned contemptuously, “Deny it, but I can see you laughing! You little junkie freak, you’re *enjoying* this!”

*Am I? I guess I have been laughing,* Mataro thought. Even as he did so, he dodged a killing blow by inches and another chuckle escaped his lips. And he felt chills shoot down his spine, like his whole body depressurizing as he belatedly realized that he had managed to evade death yet again. *Is that... fun? No. No.* “You don’t know a thing about it!”

“Oh! Then why don’t you tell me?” Minazuki suddenly skidded to a halt in the midst of a rooftop bar on one of the lower towers. The tables and chairs were already splinters before she landed, to say nothing of the shattered glass that coated the tiles like snow. Mataro stopped too, perplexed. He held the scissor blades at the ready.

*[Mataro, go for it!]* Wakaiketsu urged him; she was full to bursting with energy.

“Well? Isn’t this what you wanted before?” Minazuki said surprisingly mildly.

Mataro straightened his back, though he kept the scissors up. “They say you have all the memories every other part of your network has, is that true?”

“Hm. You could say that. We understand each other perfectly.”

“Then you remember the day of the Grand Festival at Honnouji don’t you? You can see it through Ragyo’s eyes?”

“Indeed.”

“Did you know I saw the whole thing? Oh yeah. I was there.”

Minazuki tapped her chin with her left hand, leaving a glistening trail of blood. “Is that so? Hmm! So you were!” She smiled as though she’d found a couple yen in her pocket while doing laundry. “Fake uniform. Not that Ragyo noticed. Or cared.”

Why Minazuki was giving him this chance to lay it all out, Mataro didn’t know or care. He relished the chance to do so anyway. It almost made him feel wistful. “Scariest moment of my life. I watched her - you - crush Ryuko and Satsuki both, one of those suit monsters took my sister away. And there wasn’t a thing I could do! I just... ran away. And at the end, I woulda gone back into Honnouji with them too. But I’d only have gotten myself killed,” He shook his head, “I was just a fuckin’ cheerleader.”

He hefted the scissors blades - they felt oddly heavy - with an audible click. He growled, “But not anymore. Now *I* have the power! Now I can finally do something that *matters*!” The surge of pride blasted out from Wakaiketsu as physical force. “That’s why I’m here,” He hissed eagerly, “For everything I couldn’t do back then. I’m paying it all back and then some!” He tensed to jump at Minazuki.

And then it all hit him like a truck.

The scissor blades slumped in his hands as a wave of exhaustion rolled over him. His feet anchored to the ground. His arms felt like rubber. And his eyes, all at once he was fighting to keep them open as if he hadn’t slept in days (and given his adventures in Indonesia, he knew what that was like). *Oh fuck, the pills!* He didn’t need any clues to tell what had happened. It might have

even started while he was giving his speech, and he was too caught up to notice. But as soon as the stimulant effect cut out he was plunged into cold water. Just moving, just lifting the scissors to a desperate guard position was an excruciating effort. All the more because he suddenly became aware of the burns from Minazuki's blood. It wasn't just the ones on his arm anymore. He had been careless, gotten spattered in overzealous attempts to kill her. He gasped, "Gyah! *No!*"

Minazuki's smile broadened wickedly. A malicious glint lit up her eyes. She cocked her head like a predatory bird. She had seen what was happening even if he hadn't. And once she was certain the effects would wear off, only then did she get him talking. Now there was no time to waste. Well, maybe just a little. "Oh, lookit this!" She chortled, "You have the power now, do you?" She raised her scissor blade up and cocked her arm back like a scorpion tail, her favorite means of delivering a lethal stab.

*Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck fuck! Fight it! Fight it you bastard!* Mataro cursed at himself. *Just move! Block it! Take another pill!* He stood planted on the spot, scissor blades trembling in one feeble hand while the other fished in his waist pocket for another pill. "Why didn't I - fuckin' - put it in my mouth before -," He glanced up. Big mistake.

Minazuki's gleeful grin was an icicle in his chest. She knew he was done for. And he did too. After all, what was it Shiro said? *Even if I do take another, it'll kill me in the end!* His hand froze, sweaty palm wrapped around a packet of the tiny white pills. *I - I'm going to die! Either she'll kill me, or I'll do it myself!* He wanted to scream but, frankly, didn't even have the energy for that. In a split second an entire mountain of terror and regret washed over him. *It can't end like this! I don't want to die here! Wakaiketsu can't die here with me!* . But worst of all was Ryuko, lying there cut open, looking so alone and frightened. He'd given her false hope, and that was unforgivable. "R-Ryuko -"

Minazuki lunged, and he squeezed his eyes shut. Suddenly something slammed over his mouth, a big hand with thick fingers wrapped in smooth, synthetic fabric. His eyes popped back open almost involuntarily, and saw that it was no human hand. It was made of Wakaiketu's material, matte gray one second and dazzlingly reflective the next, with a huge, perfectly clear crystal set on the back. He felt another (or maybe the other side of the same) on the palm against his lips and when he opened his mouth in surprise it pressed something else in. Another pill! No, two! The arm that this hand was connected to was also made of the same material, and it stretched around behind his shoulder. It was Wakaiketu's cloak, twisted and reformed into an arm. He could even see the seam where it rolled up on itself, sealed together. And it wasn't the only one, from his right shoulder then was another, just the same. It held up one half of his own pair of swords, *Steel Lightning*, blocking Minazuki. All of her force bore down upon it, pressing Mataro's feet into a growing crater in the floor. It trembled, but it didn't break. "Oh, *come on!*" Minazuki groaned.

*[Mataro, bite!]* Minazuki shouted, and he understood completely. He crushed both pills in the corner of his mouth, and the effect was immediate.

"GYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Raw force exploded from him, faster and more violently than ever before. The building below him was pulverized, a clean semicircular bite carved out of it. Minazuki was blasted away, overwhelmed by the perfectly spherical wave of compressed air and invisible energy. She was blown straight backwards into one of the taller towers nearby, which immediately listed and began to fall.

In that instant, Mataro was subjected to a pain like he had never known. His chest simultaneously clenched and exploded. His entire body and mind were numb in the face of it. The pain was all that existed. He couldn't even think about moving, about doing anything to fight it. All he could think was *Please, let it stop!*

And then it was over. The pain didn't vanish right away, but from that all-consuming peak it began to dissipate. Mataro's veins cooled like lava tubes, tiny little wires of rock solid endurance keeping the blood in its place. He dropped to his feet on the powdered concrete and staggered, forcing himself to stay upright. He nearly tripped and fell on all the broken wires that were spilling out from the ripped open ceilings and floors. Through gritted teeth, air reinflated his lungs to their max. Each gasp made him feel a little more alive, but allowed him to let out another groan of pain too.

"Augh! Agh! Ahh!" One after the next, each became a little more mild and his heart's rhythm began to return to normal. And then it kept speeding up. And up. At first it was alarming, he felt lightheaded and his over-oxygenated blood fluttered through his limbs. But then it started to feel good. Really, really good.

It started from his feet and rocketed up his spine like a carnival strongman game. Mataro's back instantly straightened out in a jolt. Both he and Wakaiketsu were knocked right out of conscious thought by it, riding the euphoric wave of power that was spilling out of them uncontrollably. Wakaiketsu's lights tripled in intensity. Her reflective scales all flashed together, their base matte gray color gone. She was completely chromed out, covered with smeary images of the city around them, all lit up by her own light. Mataro basked in a pool of radiant yellow light, a perfect reflection of the exquisite invigoration he was enjoying. There was a seeping, warm wetness creeping through his chest and the taste of iron invaded his mouth, but he'd never felt better. He threw his arms (all four of them) wide and let it all come blasting out. A deafening whoosh and the high pitched chime of plasmifying air was followed by a blossoming cone of multihued starbursts.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAHAHAHAAAA!"

When the storm of fire and light subsided, Mataro was left panting. "Haah... Haah... *Hoooh!*" The air was alive with static electricity, a delicious tingling across his skin. He staggered forward, stepping foot upon the exposed end of a cluster of broken wires. Electricity cracked across, and he jumped back. "Oh!" And then the entire city exploded with light.

Block by block, expanding across the city, the dormant electrical system leapt back to life. Hundreds of circuit breakers flipped in the distance with deep mechanical thuds, and several electrical plants even further out blew and cast blue halos into the cloudy night sky. But in the immediate area, the lights in every window came on and all the neon storefronts and streetlights glowed with unusual intensity. It scattered off Wakaiketsu, a rainbow bolder and more varied than even Minazuki's. Mataro gasped, eyes sparkling, and took it all in with childlike wonderment.

[*Oh, wow !*] Wakaiketsu was equally, if not more, overcome with all the power running through her. From between every thread, every gap in her stitching, the real her, the impossibly large and luminous being hidden side her, was reaching out. *This* was how she was meant to be. But just as she could tell that Mataro's perforated arteries would kill him in less than an hour, she could feel that she was burning too hot. Like a supergiant star, all that power would burn itself out and she could feel the bottom racing up already. Oh well. It was too late for regrets.

Mataro looked at the scissor blades, admired his reflection in them. “Wakaiketsu. How long to we have?”

*[Long enough,]* She said with menacing enthusiasm, *[We could even make it back to the lab if we tried.]* That idea sat there like a rock. Neither of them seriously considered it.

“... and get open heart surgery? Hehehe. I’ve seen my dad do it. I’m good.”

Minazuki ripped herself out of the rubble. She was grimacing, forehead a furrowed mess. Mataro was right there, and she raced over and stopped, hovering above him. She didn’t bother controlling her face, but he, he looked *happy* to see her! *I shouldn’t let him see me angry. No, no he **shouldn’t** be making me **angry**!* With every passing second, a sense of urgency that was not entirely her own mounted. One second closer to Ryuko’s victory. She hadn’t been worried about running out of time before, not really, but this was going to cut it close. *Unthinkable! Unthinkable!*

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done!” She roared, “You’ve killed yourself! Are you insane!”

“HAHAHAHA!” Mataro roared back, topping out his scratchy voice with shrill, hysterical laughter. “What’s up, bitch!” He waved with one of Wakaiketsu’s new chrome hands, and grinned with bloodstained teeth. “Looks like I’m outshining you now!”

# Lightspeed Mataro

October 2068

~~~~~

5:30 am

~~~~~

Kamui and cities did not go well together. Hybrids and cities were even worse. A hybrid to whom humans were like insects and a kamui rendered insensate by stimulants was probably the worst possible combination of all.

Mataro and Minazuki fought right through the center of Tokyo's downtown, north of the bay. The city was ablaze with light now, power grid overloaded by a spark from Mataro's supercharged body. But along the winding path that their combat took it went dark again, or the mosaic of electric lights was replaced with thick wads of fire. Skyscrapers toppled into the streets in groaning slow motion, streets and bridges were turned to flying rubble. Like currents through a circuit board the combatants flew down the streets at the speed of thought, turning seemingly at random and in sharp, perfect pivots. The epicenter of their battle, along the city waterfront, had been bulldozed almost completely flat by repeated shockwaves. Once replete with parks, later repurposed into slummy tenements and a seawall, it offered little resistance as time and again they blasted over the water, into the city beyond, and back out, leaving trails of destruction with each pass.

In any other circumstance, Mataro would have wept to see what was becoming of Tokyo. That wasn't a mere probability, it was a certainty. The breathtaking horror of watching the city he grew up in die around him was bad enough. Thinking back to the cost of war in Indonesia, he would have reeled to imagine the consequences of ripping the heart out of Japan's great metropolis, out of Ryuko's realm. And deep below him, huddled in the sterile fluorescent lights of their disaster shelters, the millions who lived in the city could only listen in desperate panic to the rumbling above as their lives were destroyed. That would have been the worst, if he had spared them a thought. But instead he was having the time of his life.

To human observation he and Minazuki were glowing comets that went screaming through the air. Sparks and dazzling light leapt from and between them. They only dissolved into humanoid figures in those brief moments when they parted to orbit around and size each other up for their next attacks. Otherwise, the surest sign of their continued combat was the constant noise of blades clashing like millions of rocks thrown through millions of windows one after another, and the violence with which they rebounded off each other and through the crumbling buildings around them.

In his own mind, all of that chaos was clear as day. He felt more in touch with the city than ever, his Shingantsu going wild and pouring out of him like the current running through Wakaiketsu. He was charged with a sense of every pebble, every mote of dust on the wind. Too much to possibly use, but he felt it all with razor clarity anyway. Staticky footfalls told of the hollow voids of transit tunnels below, and he stomped through the earth into them and confounded Minazuki by vanishing into the gloom only to erupt from the road at some incomprehensible vector. The neon signs of the storefronts and clubs raced by in a tunnel, each one speaking of its own miniature terrain, its warren



of mazes to be traversed with high-speed scrambling and rebounds. And when they soared high through the air, all the hundreds of cornices and balconies and square miles of glass window were baffles for Minazuki's counterblows, surfaces to slide and bounce from.

Forget all those millions! It didn't matter if they'd roamed these streets four times longer than he'd been alive, they didn't know the city like he did. They didn't know it as a battlefield. His last battlefield. The ultimate battlefield. He knew the city like nobody ever had before or would again.

The scissor blades no longer felt remotely cumbersome in his hands. He had two new arms now, Wakaiketsu's cloak reshaped and wielding his own pair of swords, *Steel Lightning*. They were bulkier than his natural arms, carved into rippling muscles, and longer too so the stretch over his shoulders was no impediment. Now that he had them to parry and riposte, able to fight Minazuki almost on their own, the true function of the scissor blades became clear. *Steel Lightning* was the anvil, the scissors the hammer. They locked up Minazuki's sword in whirlwind combat and it clove in for the finish, forcing Minazuki back or warding off her attack with just the threat of its jaws closing around her. It felt preposterously light despite its massive size and yet crackling with power, enough to batter Minazuki out of the sky with a crushing overhead - a move he would never have dared to try if Wakaiketsu hadn't been covering him with *Steel Lightning*. And snapping it shut sent out great shockwaves that crushed buildings into hourglasses before shearing them entirely in half. He had free reign to juggle it between sword swings and scissor snaps, discovering new techniques every second.

It was a *joy* to use, and while Mataro knew exactly what these swords represented to Ryuko - and was truly grateful that she had finished her vendetta - he couldn't believe that she had just thrown it away. When he had first pulled it from the muck of Tokyo bay in the faint illumination of Wakaiketsu's glow, he had wondered if she would be mad at him. But he was so ecstatic that he'd managed to find it at all (and was right at the end of his breath freediving in the grimy depths) that he decided not to worry about it. And now it wasn't his problem anymore. He couldn't think clearly about Ryuko at all right now, except the image of her and Senketsu, bathed in Ragyo's blood. The bright and shining ideal. *God, it must have felt amazing, when she and Satsuki cut her down!* He was racing closer and closer to that feeling with every moment. He was clawing the advantage away from Minazuki and by the snarl on her face she clearly knew it.

But she wasn't dead yet. Somehow, despite Mataro catching up in speed so his superior swordsmanship began to tell, she had pulled fresh resolve from somewhere. That shouldn't have been possible for her. She hadn't meant to hold anything back before. She had surpassed her human limits; annihilating the enemy was her purpose and there was no fiber of her being that could delay in that. But now that Mataro had really come close to killing her, more than once, she fought back with the full extent of her wits and drew strength from a wellspring deep inside her. Power flowed through her, crushing Mataro whenever he held still long enough for her to drive home a clean hit. She was wise to all his tricks, but he threw surprise attacks and feints at her every second. The only option was to respond in kind.

Minazuki reached out her left hand and stretched her fingers around a towering skyscraper and wrenched it out of the ground like a weed. From her vantage high in the sky she spotted Mataro racing up towards her. "Die already you little *freak*!" She shouted, and then hurled the building at him, foundations first. Mataro had committed to fighting her to the death, and that alone had cemented him as perhaps even worse than Jakuzure or Tsumugu. Sure, her hatred for them burned hotter, but to act with such willful insanity was beyond her conception. "A shard of cosmic power in you, and you throw it all away! Why!" Mataro's mad laughter was the only response she got as

he vanished below the plummeting building. “If you were *still* a human, then maybe I could understand it! You should be better than that! How can you let Ryuko *use* you like this!”

Mataro wasn’t just behind the skyscraper, he was within it. The moment he’s spied a stairwell that opened out of the bottom Wakaiketsu flared her boosters and they dashed in. Even as it fell around them he scaled it, dashing across the floors and through holes in broken ceilings. Busting right through would have been easy, he didn’t need to do this. He did it because he could. *[LEFT! RIGHT! THAT OFFICE! JUMP!]* Wakaiketsu directed him, with impulses that transferred to him at lightspeed. They had been through so many of these buildings during the fight that navigating was easy. And then they were out on the roof, still hurtling through the sky at an angle. Grinning, he flashed the scissors and leapt off the roof at Minazuki. She raced to the counterattack, slashing at him even faster than he could move, fast enough that all three of his weapons were employed on the defense. They whirled through the air, each hot on each other’s heels trying to slip past the other’s guard.

Everything Mataro did was unexpected to Minazuki. Her training at REVOCS had moved her from a passable swordsman to a good one, but she relied on her raw speed advantage against the masters among the kamui corps. Now she could barely react as his swords snaked past hers and poked holes through her skull and chest. She would try to counterattack, only to his air and he held back a snap from the scissors just a microsecond longer than she expected to and that was enough to nearly kill her. She couldn’t break his defenses on her own, not anymore. She reached deeper into the guiding intelligence inside her, for optimized movements and plans of attack developed by an eternal thinking machine. But her body resisted; it was harder than she thought to discard her muscle memory and habits from her days as a human. Mataro had forced her to realize this, and that was maybe his greatest sin of all. “WHY!” She bellowed.

They crashed to ground like meteors amid a cloud of market stalls and rebounded. Mataro flipped head over heels and then scrambled across the flying sheet metal and tarps like a staircase. “Alright I admit it! I am doing this for me!” He shouted, raspy voice cracking as he pushed it heedlessly beyond its natural range to be heard above the clash of arms. Minazuki’s nose wrinkled in consternation - that wouldn’t have made any sense to her as a human and it certainly didn’t now that she had glimpsed eternity. But Mataro laughed and went on, “I am having fun! *I am* !” Just saying it, a pressure in his head he hadn’t even noticed released. It was pure bliss. “HAHAHAHAaaa!” He belowed out his laughter until his voice cut off in a hoarse squeak. “You were right about me!” He said, snapping his scissors over and over again in a manic flurry.

Minazuki easily evaded his wild attack and leapt over the scissor blades, stabbing down at his head. Without hesitation he tilted back and went completely horizontal in midair, Minazuki’s blade only inches above her head. Inwardly she cursed herself - Mataro had done this exact thing before - and then an idea was suggested from outside her. Her arm went flat and swung down at him like a whip. Too late. Mataro tucked his legs up to his chest and kicked her in the gut, sending her crashing into a skyscraper. It was all glass outside all offices inside and she smashed right through, but the one behind it was solid concrete apartments and she cratered its facade. Pressed flat into it she saw Mataro leap onto the top of the building she’d just flown through, Wakaiketsu’s new arms crossed above the scissor blades.

“YOU HEAR THAT, YOU WERE RIGHT!” He shouted at the top of his lungs. Blood trickled down his chin. This time she went on the attack, sending her extending fingers ahead of her lunge to rip the building apart. He didn’t care about the haze of boiling blood that scalded his exposed skin - he was beyond pain now. But it did force him into the air as his foothold crumbled. “But it aint for the glory! I don’t care what *they* think!” He waved *Steel Lightning* dismissively across the

city. “When I first asked for a Kamui, only Ryuko was in my court,” (This was not actually true, but nobody had bothered to correct him then), “Because she *knew* ! She knew there was nothing better than this, fighting as one, nothin’ better in the entire universe!”

They clashed again and again, and Mataro kept on yelling, “The rest of them, they were all like ‘it’s too dangerous! The fame’ll make him crazy!’ And you know what? I get it!” He said in an astonished tone as if they could commiserate on this. “I was weak and lazy and-and a thieving, scrawny, pervy little twerp!” He capped that off with a feint that got the righthand *Steel Lightning* between Minazuki’s ribs while the left locked her sword up, momentarily pinning her for a vertical snap of the scissors, plunging from overhead towards her head. She raised her left hand and caught him at the wrists, wrapping bloodsoaked fingers around his hands and arresting the scissors’ descent. He drew back his left sword and went in for another attack, still holding one sword in her body and the scissors where they were. He struck again and again and she parried then countered, and they spun through the air, locked together and crashing through the cityscape. “BUT WHAT ELSE WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO?” He spat in her face as they crashed through the street into a subway line.

They came apart, and Minazuki leapt backwards down the tunnel, casting kaleidoscopic lights down its distant recesses. Mataro raced towards her and she countercharged, dashing right past him and the rebounding, forcing him to pivot in reply. Back and forth they flew in a cloud of brilliant white hot trails, ripping up the tunnel until the ceiling caved in and the night sky, rapidly darkening with clouds and the distant toll of thunder, was above them once more. “I WAS SO CLOSE, AND I WAS SUPPOSED TO JUST... JUST WALK AWAY? TO BE JUST ANOTHER FUCKING *SHMUCK*! HELL NO!” He shouted as a faint mist of rain pattered down on them, blurring the brilliant neon lights into a glorious smear. And on they fought. “I said it from the very beginning,” He said in a lower voice, barely suppressing a laugh. The words that were inserting themselves into his (or Wakaiketsu’s?) delirious thoughts now were for them, not for Minazuki, “I said, from way back when I was kid, I was gonna be a baller! YA HEAR! A BALLER!” He broke down laughing, as he stomped onto the ground and Wakaiketsu let out a shockwave like an invisible shriek that blasted Minazuki away and shattered the buildings on either side of their crater. “AND LOOK AT ME NOW!”

“Oh I see!” Minazuki hung in the air, a new malicious grin on her face as a new idea was suggested to her. “So not a glory-hog, but a thrill-seeker, my apologies!” Her voice resumed its oozing condescension.

“YOU GOT THAT RIGHT!” Mataro replied, “AND IF THESE ARE THE LAST MINUTES OF MY LIFE, I’M GONNA LIVE ‘EM TO THE MAX!”

“Hmm!” Minazuki sniffed. “Well, I have to tell you, you were right about me too. I am not human any longer. And I should indeed discard those limits I have clung to.” She raised both her hands in front of her, and her outfit shifted. Gone was the elegant dress as the crimson fabric receded up her arms and legs and off her midriff. Spines, angry and heamatitic, erupted from sleek plates forming on her shoulders. Thin glowing bands of rainbow light framed the contours of her chest and belly as the her bodice became a wispy thin thing, a V that cut all the way from her shoulders down to her waist revealing perfect pale skin. About her legs, nothing but the smallest strip between them remained and her thighs and butt were free above knee-high boots. She could not restore the ripped left side of her outfit, but besides that it was completely recast in a form much more like that of a kamui, complete with jagged red horns erupting in three rows amidst the gems in her glowing blonde hair. The power emanating from her somehow increased still further, a crushing pressure like the depths of the ocean.

Giving up that form, an outfit that the old her would have liked, was to surrender the facade of individuality the life-fibers had left her. And yet she grinned maliciously as she did it. This form brought out the absolute maximum power of her outfit, but it wasn't that which she was sure would ruin him. Mataro wouldn't be able to resist this. She knew him well enough now to know his simian reproductive urges would distract him now. To his doom.

*Look at him,* she thought, the overpowering superiority back in full force, *Look at the way his mouth dropped. This is what I was missing, these half-evolved kamui wearers are so attached to their base humanity so of course it's meant to be exploited!* And she wasn't wrong about that, Mataro was stunned. Just when he thought the thrill could get no higher, Minazuki bared her curves and took on this skimpy, kamui-like form.

*Holy shit. She's even better than I thought!*

Wakaiketsu had a similar reaction, *[That power! Hohhhh! If I can absorb... that, it might just be enough power to stop me from burning up!]* Her body clenched around him, pumping him up and ironing out his erratic heartbeat. She had no proof she could save him after that, but it was a hope to hold onto. But, more than that, she just wanted it. Even if she was overwhelmed and destroyed by it like Senketsu. She was hungry. No holding that back anymore. *[Hold together, Mataro! Just hold together!]*

"Yes. Yes!" Mataro squeaked, barely containing hysterical glee. He was grinning like a kid on Christmas, genuine joy in his eyes. Minazuki jerked her head back in shock. There was something about that reaction that didn't seem quite right. "Yes! God, I am so glad they sent *you*! It could've been anyone, a man, a fat chick, but no!" He spread his arms wide, glorying in the sight of her, "They sent you! AHAHAHA IT'S PERFECT!"

Minazuki raised her left arm. From the bleeding tips of her fingers, a glittering red bolt shattered out at many times the speed of sound, roaring through the air and trailing a haemic mist. Her blood, projected as a weapon. Mataro dodged and watched it go by with awe. Minazuki was right behind it, no longer allowing herself to be limited by her human training to only use one arm or another at a time. She slashed at him over and over again, and at point-blank ranged fired several more blasts of blood at him. One of them connected, just barely blocked from burning right through Mataro by the flat edge of the scissor blades. The concussive force was still enough to blast him back, and after he hurtled several blocks away he managed to right himself and land skidding in the street. "Oh *awesome!*" The bombardment didn't stop, more blood splashing around him and melting concrete and lampposts into slag.

Minazuki raced back at him, and Mataro responded in kind. The air was filled with clashes in their dozens and they fought more furiously than ever. "Wow, wow wow wow!" Mataro drank in the way Minazuki moved - like Satsuki in the full force of her power. Straight-backed, towering, ruthless. But this time he could match it, rather than just barely hanging on! *They sent her here, just for me!* He thought deliriously, *So that I could have my moment, feel what Ryuko felt when she saved the world!* Somewhat more soberly, and with a kind of wistful pain, in the back of Mataro's mind he realized he didn't know what he'd do if he did survive. *Nothing will ever compare to this.*

He fought with reckless abandon, turning wild acrobatics in the air and attacking and parrying with loose, dancing movements. It made him still harder for Minazuki to predict, but that wasn't the intention. He did it purely for fun.

*He's not distracted at all!* Minazuki was past being infuriated anymore, she felt an oddly human sense of disappointment, "Don't tell me you really do like this form *better*, do you?"

Mataro laughed, “Of course! Look at you! You’re so - I mean - God *damn* !” That reaction got only a disgusted crinkle of the nose from Minazuki, so Mataro tried again, “You got that Ragyo bod’, plus that viscous, scary hotness like Satsuki with Junketsu! I wouldn’t be a real baller if I let you hold this back against me! But I’m doing a good job, huh? Admit it, I’m making you sweat aren’t I!”

“Hmph!” There was no response to that, not even pretending to ignore him, that would deny him the satisfaction.

And it showed. Mataro giggled hysterically and shouted, “YEAH, AND YOU KNOW WHY? BECAUSE I AIN’T JUST SOME STREET RAT, NOT ANYMORE! I’M THE PRINCE OF THIS COUNTRY, AND I’M THE ONE WHO’S GONNA MAKE RYUKO’S FUTURE COME TRUE!”

“I’M LIGHTSPEED MATARO!”

~~~~~  
5:40 am  
~~~~~

Mid-battle, Minazuki abruptly skidded to a halt. The blasted ground beneath her ruby heels was running slick with what had become a torrential downpour. The sky rumbled and flashed overhead, roiling with fast moving clouds.

And she could feel a presence out there in the storm. Another kamui was coming. Great, that was the last thing she needed. They were closer now than she would have liked; Mataro was so infernally distracting she hadn’t managed to detect them until too late. Now she strained to identify which of them it was. *Has one of the ones I left behind managed to catch up? If so, it could only be Hououmaru or Sanageyama. Well, I suppose I can only hope it's the former.* She had already correctly surmised that no more kamui would issue forth from the research complex, Nonon being too injured and the other new kamui wearer Yuda being unready to face a foe like her. *There’s something about this storm, like the kamui’s aura is spread out through it.* Now *that* was familiar.

In the distance, Mataro stopped too. “What’s wrong... you gettin’ tired?” He hollered, chest heaving. The rain had soaked his long hair and blended with the blood still trickling from his mouth and several minor wounds Minazuki had managed to inflict. They were both running out of time, their desperation forcing them each to fight all the harder with every ounce of their wits so neither had managed to claw a permanent upper hand. But at least Mataro was only desperate to keep the fun, and his life, going as long as he could. For Minazuki, a new opponent she couldn’t handle would mean the end of her mission.

She shouted a retort at Mataro, “Why don’t you-”

A bolt of lightning split the sky, clawing its way down from the roiling clouds to strike home right on Minazuki’s head and split it open like an overripe melon. “Whoa!” Mataro held up one of his bulky artificial hands to shield his eyes. He whirled around, now aware of the new presences racing towards him. And sure enough, he saw a trail of light rise up over what was left of the skyline. Summery blue and green skipping through the air.

At first he thought he was hallucinating.

“Hold IIIIIIIIT!” Mako shouted as she came hurtling towards the ground. Mataro and Minazuki both watched with utter consternation as she came to about the least dignified landing possible, tripping and spinning over the mounds of rubble on her heels. She ended up standing right beside Mataro as if she’d planned it. It was obviously Mako, but Mataro could in fact see very little of her. Just her legs and the tips of her fingers. The rest of her was hidden behind a preposterously large stack of boxes, gifts, hastily wrapped with bits of the cardboard below the colored paper still clearly visible and gunky wads of tape on the corners. How she had managed to fly while carrying them, he couldn’t begin to guess (in fact, Tonbo’s command over the wind had crafted a little bubble of still air around her).

“Oh great, it’s the brickheaded sister,” Minazuki groaned as she watched, the top of her head still knitting back together. Not the worst option, but with those lightning strikes still an unacceptable nuisance. She was certainly going to kill her, and fast.

Mataro was instantly down from the high of battle as panic gripped him. Mako couldn’t be here! She had no idea the danger she was in! “Mako!”

“Huh? Oh, hey bro!” She chirped back merrily, and the pile of presents swayed precariously.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Mataro hissed.

“What’s it look like?” Mako answered innocently, “I’m here to help!”

Mataro rolled his eyes, “Oh, well *hallelujah* !”

Mako completely failed to detect his sarcasm (or chose to ignore it, which for her was essentially the same thing). “Wait a mo’,” She said, “I just gotta find somewhere to dump all these...” She began peering around, tilting her head and the gifts all over the place.

“Forget that! You need to go back to Ryuko!”

“Nuh-uh! These are her baby shower presents! I gotta make sure they don’t get crushed and - AH!” As she spun around, twisting her neck back and forth as far as it would go, she spied Minazuki and yelped. “Hey! You! I got somethin’ to show you!” She immediately wheeled around, yelling at Minazuki (through the boxes). Minazuki stared at this odd creature, a pile of cardboard with legs, literally hopping mad.

[*Mako,*] Tonbo reminded her.

“*Oh* , right!” She said with some frustration. “You just wait!”

Well, Minazuki wasn’t inclined to oblige. But Mako’s next move was as unpredictable as her arrival; she turned away and hopped across the rubble, having evidently found her footing. “Is she serious?” Minazuki asked herself. *Even for her, turning her back on me is a new level of stupidity.* But it was that very thought that made her hesitate. *Unless it’s a trap.*

Mataro ran after. “Not that it ain’t good to see you sis, but you’ve gotta go! It’s tough enough going against her as is, I can’t make sure you’re safe!”

In a blur of movement Mako arrived at the edge of the field of rubble, where at least some of the buildings remained standing. “No, no,” she muttered to herself as she darted around, appraising each she came across.

“Mako!” Mataro wasn’t going to give in that easily.

“I’ll be fine!” She said, turning to look at him. Her eyes went wide as she saw the damage the battle had done. Wakaiketu’s new four-armed form. Blood trickling down his lips. Puckering burns on his arms and chest. And the crazed look in bleary red eyes. He looked half dead already. “Mataro! What happened to you!”

Mataro flinched. Intense pain, but not physical, struck his chest. “Mako, *please*,” He begged her. He couldn’t bear to tell her what he’d done, that he was dying. What that would do to her was a thousand times more terrifying than anything Minazuki could do. All of a sudden the guilt, the realization of what his death would mean for her, for his parents, for Ryuko and Satuski and Nonon and the rest, slammed into him. The only escape was to drive her away, so at least he’d never have to bear witness to it. Not much of a comfort.

*What have I done !*

Mako was back on task though. She kept searching for an acceptable building, and finally found one, “Ah ha!”

It was the low, unformed ruin of a municipal building. Sturdy gray concrete in one solid block, its lower floors had withstood the battle with minimal damage. But now Mako upheaved the entire structure in one smooth motion. She shifted the boxes into the palm of one hand, supported on a single large one (a jungle gym, Mako was thinking ahead) which she balanced like a pizza box. Mataro marveled that she could manage it at all, but in spite of some frightening wobbling the boxes - exceeding her height all told - managed to stay upright. But that was nothing. Next she leant down and dug her fingers into the edge of the building, right where it touched the ground. The concrete gave way to her fingers like clay, and as soon as she had a grip she casually lifted the entire thing upwards. Mataro stared in open-mouthed awe as the building, all in one piece, sprung up from the ground completely horizontal. Below it, the basement level and the foundations were exposed to the open air, the complete floor plan visible between the frayed walls. Mako, of course, was too focused to think what she was doing was all that impressive.

“There we go!” She was looking at a stairwell down in the middle of the building that descended to the next basement level. As if the building weighed nothing, she jumped down into the basement carrying the presents in one hand and the building tilted vertically in the other. There was a tremendous din of crashing and shattering and tables and chairs, pencils and books poured from the broken windows, but she ignored that. She hopped over to the descending stairs and carefully set the presents down right inside it. “Hmm hmm, lookin’ good!” she hummed in satisfaction, gave the top box a little pat, and then leapt back out of the pit. She smoothly and gently set the building down right where it had been, and it boomed as it settled into place. Nestled into a collapse-proof nook and with one of the sturdiest buildings as a lid, the boxes were as safe as they were going to get. Mako smacked her hands together.

And Minazuki was charging at her, mere yards away.

While she was watching Mako putter around, Minazuki kicked herself for hesitating. “What am I doing, letting these *lowlifes* delay me! I ought to know, she’s far too stupid for this to be a trap!” From her encounter with her among the other kamui at the coast, she knew Mako was useless as a duelist and required someone to protect her while she unleashed long ranged attacks. That brought a smile to her face, “So, either the rat prince has to guard his princess, or he watches her die in front of him. Either way,” She said as she sprang, “Bad news for him!”

Mataro didn't notice until too late, he was so caught up in his thoughts. "MAKO!" He gasped. There was absolutely no way she could block that, the strength and speed of it were way beyond Mako's skill to react to.

In a flash, Mako's bat was in her hand. She whirled around, steely eyed, and with a resounding clang and matching shockwave met Minazuki's strike perfectly.

"What the *HELL* !" Minazuki roared as Mako, overflowing with raw strength, forced her trembling sword slowly down. Wildly dancing magenta flames leapt up from her body. They surged from someplace inside her chest and enveloped her in a glowing nimbus. A new aura, a presence Wakaiketsu had never felt but which Minazuki had seen in Ragyo's memories. "*Senketsu* !" For once her surprise was not built on rage, but on genuine astonishment. His name escaped her lips in a gasp. "*Impossible!*"

*[Oh I'm not sure about that!]* Senketsu's telepathic voice was bold in all their ears, relishing being the center of attention once again after so long. Mako grinned toothily as she felt his power soak through Tonbo's threads. It stung for just a moment but within seconds that was just a memory. In her gut it felt like the rising of a great current of water - she thought of the feeling of rocking waves that lasts even after you left the beach - but where waves sloshed back and forth chaotically this was directed. Driving her body to move, putting arms and legs exactly where they needed to go. Even from that first moment as Mako felt this new way of using her body, she instinctively got what Senketsu was doing.

Mataro yanked his head back, a fresh beaming grin on his face. "Whoa-ho-ho-ho-ho-YEAH!" He laughed, straightening out his back and brandishing his swords again. The fresh burst of adrenaline cranked him right back to the ecstatic peak again. It wasn't Mako who had just charged to her death, it was Minazuki! He needed no complex explanations of how this was possible; destiny's hand was at work and he was overflowing with excitement just to see it.

Wakaiketsu put their feelings to words one way, *[This changes everything!]*

And Mataro did it another way, "You're fucked now!"

He changed in, scissor's snapping, and Minazuki had little choice but to dash back. The two Mankanshokus stood facing her across the wasteland with confident fires in their eyes. What she felt then, under their intermingling purple and yellow radiance, was no human emotion. She was abruptly aware that she was cornered. Denial, rage, and despair were all skipped over, because what had just happened to Mako was far too important. A critical flaw in her master's understanding.

But she certainly seemed enraged enough. "*How, how how!*" she railed, "You're supposed to be dead!"

*[That's what I **wanted** you to think!]* Senketsu shouted back triumphantly.

*Okay, so he evaded our detection on purpose.* They now understood that at least. *But how?* This was the next step, the next question that entered Minazuki's thoughts as if it was her own. *There shouldn't be anywhere, on Earth or in The Cosmos, that we cannot perceive. Surely some loose thread would have chanced him by!* Far away, minds were considering this, learning that perhaps this thing had infiltrated them, virus-like, and sat undiscovered right above its anomalous world for years. That wasn't for Minazuki to know. To her, this all just didn't compute.



She would have formulated another question, tease out some more details, but before she could Mako butted in. **“Yeah! You see now! Senketsu really is alive, so you can’t lie to me anymore!”** the rain intensified as Mako got more ramped up, howling winds blasting at Minazuki. Newspapers and fallen branches flew up in miniature cyclones and the sky above roiled. Through the rapidly swirling clouds, shafts of faint light thrust from the east and scattered around Mako. She hollered, **“And now ‘cuz of that, I know what you really are!”** She sucked in a huge breath, and Mataro wondered hopefully that she might reveal some earth-shattering secret of the universe that Senketsu had imparted onto her. **“You’re just SORE LOSERS!”**

Minazuki reared her head back, offended and just plain confused. “I beg your pardon!”

**“Yeah you *Minazuki* ! You went and joined the evil side just because you Kiryuins lost all your money!”** Mako pointed an accusing finger at her. **“Don’t even try to deny it, you said so yourself! You backed the wrong horse, sorry! And that’s exactly what all you life-fibers are like! Ryuko stops you from blowing up the world, so you try and do it anyway! And then we stop *that* so now you come back just for spite! You just want to get back at Ryuko, kill her baby, ruin her life, that’s all it is isn’t it! And then on top of that, you want to get back at *us* so you try and turn us all against each other; this whole yarn about how Ryuko’s really a giant alien space monster and the baby Nozomi is just gonna be a big battery for her!”** At this point Mako was in full gesticulation mode, wiggling her arms like tentacles (and nearly smacking Mataro in the face) to represent a space monster and bending them into zig-zags like cartoon lightning bolts as a symbolic battery. **“But Senketsu! Is! Alive! So all of that was just lies!”**

*[That’s right!]*

**“Yeah, you tell ‘em Senketsu!”**

*[You being so wrong about Ryuko’s true nature is proof my plan worked! I only wish I could have kept it going longer!]*

*So, you’ve been planning with Ryuko, have you?* The intelligence of the life-fiber network behind Minazuki’s eyes was somewhat alarmed by that. Not that it was capable of feeling panic, or anything identifiable as a human emotion, but this was not a fact that boded well. And what’s more, the unexpected termination of contact with the REVOCS army (something Minazuki did not worry about until she was permitted to) now had a startling explanation. *Could this... thing really have absorbed Shinra Koketsu? He is definitely no ordinary kamui. But one thing’s for sure, he’s lying about Ryuko.* “You really expect me to be intimidated by that? You really expect me to believe that?” She scoffed, “Matoi, a human? Do you even understand how absurd the idea is? The life-fibers are woven into the fabric of the universe, eternal, attuned to law of the universe. A human mind, loaded with meaningless values and desires, could never comprehend that plane of existence! They can never do more than serve the life-fibers! No, Matoi may wear the skin of a human, but that is all it is!”

**“Nah, that’s not it,”** Mako quickly and casually retorted, **“You just don’t want it to be true! ‘Cuz you know that one Ryuko is more than you can handle, and you can’t deal with knowing Nozomi’s gonna be just as strong one day! Well too bad! Because we’re not gonna stop there, first there’s gonna be her, then more, then even more, and *so* many more hybrids that none of you life-fibers will ever even *think* of coming back here! Whole nurseries full of ‘em! Whole schools!”** Again with wild hand gestures, of cradles and students writing away at desks, **“And when they all grow up you’re *done*!”**

“Oh, we will *always* come back!” Minazuki said with a haughty sneer, “Do you really believe that

there could be a truce, a ceasefire! So long as Matoi exists, she challenges the supremacy of the life-fibers. This is a battle for survival, and it will last until the end of time!”

**“You all had your chance, and you blew it! Ryuko beat you! GET OVER IT ALREADY!”**

“NEVER!”

“That’s fine by me!” Mataro interjected, and coiled his body to lunge at Minazuki with grin. Not that he wasn’t getting fired up from Mako’s bravado - the image of an ever growing horde of hybrids was so glorious it almost made him regret that he’d never see it - but he couldn’t hold back any longer. Fighting not just with Mako but with *Senketsu*, back from the dead, was just too perfect.

The moment he leapt, the stillness broke. Lightning roared down at Minazuki - even she was not fast enough to evade it. She lifted her sword with a roar of fury and the white hot force cracked down onto it instead of her. But that pinned her in place - it was *Senketsu* who planned this, not Tonbo or Mako. They outsped Mataro even as Minazuki’s arm was still raised, blasting across the grey rubble plan. The wind rolled with them, the bones of the city groaned under its gale force. With a shrill cry, **“Huy-YA!”** Mako slammed Minazuki’s ribs with a perfect line drive, pummeling them to nothing.

As she reformed, Minazuki had an instant to reflect on the irony of her worlds. This had indeed become a battle for survival.

On the very first charge, Mako immediately got it. Not the hows of battle - though her muscle memory did begin to imprint right away - but the why. The roaring anticipation of the attack, the brutal satisfaction of feeling bone and flesh break beneath her bat. All she wanted in the world was to break Minazuki in half, and to be able to just do it? “Hohhhh,” She exhaled, admiring her handiwork in the bloody comet that streaked away.

But *Senketsu* had no time for that. The moment her feet touched the ground she sprung off again. When Minazuki reformed, Mako was already leveling another swing at her, but this time she was ready. She met Mako’s strike and slid elegantly from parry to riposte, “RAAAGH!” she shouted as she did; that was not elegant. The time for fighting silently, revealing nothing to the enemy, was over. Mako blocked head on, absorbing the mighty shock from Minazuki’s lightning-fast strike the way Ryuko did - the way she had been told not to do it - and powered on through. They erupted into a spate of traded blows, Mako dashing unpredictably around, trying to find an opening while Minazuki followed suit just to keep up. After dozens of thunderous clashes - barely a fraction of a second - Minazuki parted and skidded behind Mako, but she didn’t pursue.

For an instant Minazuki’s superhuman senses picked up an odd prickling in the air, and then lightning shafted down and engulfed her. It was a full-force, tree-trunk thick blast, and it carved a crater into the ground like an artillery shell. Minazuki was strewn across the crater, a pulsing red paste. She immediately reasserted control and the blood, steaming against the driving rain, pulled together and began to assume once again the shape of bone and muscle, skin and fabric. But though not seriously wounded, Minazuki lost the use of her eyes for a moment. She guessed what that meant in the nick of time dropped to the ground.

Mataro roared in right above her, missing a decapitating scissor snap by mere inches. Like another bolt of lightning, he rocketed on past her, zig-zagging through the air and then abruptly about-facing to charge back in. Tonbo’s power was all around him, pressurizing the air. It felt to him as though his feet weren’t kicking the air, but pushing off against a hard surface as the wind strained

invisibly in the opposite direction. His return voyage was nearly instant, but Minazuki nevertheless had the chance to unleash a torrent of her blood at him as he flew. Not that it did any good, the sizzling waves parted around him in a shearing cone as Tonbo sped his passage. But he would never have thought to blind Minazuki like that, or propel Mataro with his power. Senketsu, like a whisper, was in his thoughts. Tonbo followed his suggestions without hesitation.

When Minazuki parried Mataro's return attacks (she had to use all her superior speed now to block all three swords), Mako was at her back. She swung down on Minazuki's head, but Minazuki lifted her left arm and caught her bat, though the momentum carried down and split her stretching fingers and even her forearm until the bat was lodged. **"Oh!"** Mako gasped indignantly at that. It should have bought her precious milliseconds to focus on Mataro, but Mako did something neither of them expected. She tucked up her legs and then extended them, wrapping them around Minazuki's waist and trapping her in a leglock. Then, she rocked back, flipping backwards while floating in the air and taking Minazuki with her. She was yanked away from Mataro and slammed into the broken ground.

*[Oh wow!] Senketsu was ecstatic, [You can feint just like Ryuko can! She changes her mind so fast there's no tell of what she'll do next, but you, you don't know what you're gonna do next!]*

**"Oh, I know what I'm gonna do next!"** Mako said as she plunged down to continue the battle, **"I'm gonna smash her face in!"**

Senketsu laughed, *[You see? That's why you two are friends!]*

# To Be Born A Kiryuin

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October 2068

~~~~~

5:40 am

~~~~~

Shiro and Izanami didn't announce that it was done. They didn't need to. The squalling was enough. The moment they heard that unmistakable sound, everyone leapt to their feet, their hearts seized by a violent burst of joy.

"Oh! Ohmygod ohmygod!" Nonon's mouth ran ahead of her, and she ahead of the rest. She was the first one to the operating room door, but they came right on behind her. About forty minutes before Rei had arrived, and shortly after Aikuro and Tsumugu had limped back too. The only reason they were a step behind Nonon was the exhausted stupors they had sunk into the moment they landed. On his hospital bed, Houka moaned and briefly stirred despite his unconsciousness as Misaki's sudden agitation hit him. She couldn't stand it, being stuck with him now. They all had to see, even Shiro. They all needed to see and know for sure it was real. The terror of blood and guts completely forgotten, Nonon threw open the door. And there she was.

A tiny, ruddy pink face peeked out from fresh white blankets. The baby, Nozomi, was clearly still ill-prepared for the world, crying with a perpetually open mouth and squinting her unseeing eyes against the light. But for all that, she already had a surprisingly thick shock of messy black curls on her head.

"Hi!" Ryuko whispered, flush with pride, as Satsuki hummed softly and rubbed her daughter's head, trying to soothe her crying. As expected, the moment the operation was over Ryuko's body had snapped back to its normal, perfect condition immediately. Satsuki had joined her in the bed, blood and viscera be damned. She nuzzled her cheek into the crook of Ryuko's neck and was wholly absorbed in Nozomi. Where Ryuko was beaming with her irrepressible energy back in full force, welcoming them all to come and see, Satsuki only spared a momentary flicker of her eyes towards Nonon. But to Nonon, that completed the beatific scene. She said, without saying anything, *"You see? This is what I've been waiting for. She's my reward. She's the new purpose of my life."*

It took Nonon's breath away. There were tears spilling from her eyes before she even noticed it, and she found it necessary to lean on the wall to brace herself. That freed up the doorway, and Aikuro was the first one in after her. He gave Nonon's arm a supportive squeeze and then shuffled over so Tsumugu, Rei, Yuda, and finally Shiro (though he in his own quiet way was so overwhelmed he could hardly look) could enter the tiny chamber. There were gasps and coos, but saying anything more than a hushed, "Oh wow" just felt wrong. "Isn't she *perfect*?" Ryuko asked. That prompted some effusive gushing from Aikuro, Rei, and Yuda, none of whom had been present in a delivery room before and who were willing to show how the magic of the moment

affected them. Tsumugu nodded vigorously, and let out a hard sniff as he struggled to hold back tears.

Satsuki nodded too, but they might as well have not been there. Nothing at all mattered but Nozomi. She smiled, a soft and secretive smile that only Nonon had any guess at. She had something new, something she could never explain. In Nozomi was the innocence that had died in Satsuki before she could remember it. Under her soft touch, Nozomi's crying gradually quieted, and Satsuki thought, *That's right. She only cries because she's hungry and cold, and we can solve that so simply. She doesn't know about good and bad, fear, sadness. She can just be ! She doesn't know all the horrible things I've done so that we could be here, or even how wrong it is that Ryuko and I are here at all. All she knows is us, and we're all she needs.* Ryuko seemed to have naturally intuited how to hold Nozomi, and even now Satsuki was just a little jealous of that. *Oh but no matter. I get to see them like this.* She fixed it in her memory, a sight she intended to revisit every day for the rest of her life. *Everyone begins like this,* Satsuki mused, *all the untold billions who've ever lived even before the life-fibers ever came to Earth. And if it weren't for Ryuko, it would be gone forever.* She was humbled by the immensity of it.

Nozomi opened her eyes a bit, the same arresting blue as her mothers', and her feeble sausage fingers wrapped around one of Satsuki's. Ryuko giggled, "Look how smart she is!" to a chorus of agreement. Satsuki just gasped in astonishment, her heart nearly exploding as Nozomi recognized her.

Nonon burst out bawling at the sight of that. She'd been studying Satsuki's reactions and little else the whole time. Seeing exactly what Satsuki had been missing overwhelmed her with an aching mixture of joy and shame that she hadn't understood before. Yuda put a hand on her shoulder, "You okay?"

"Oh, you just don't get it!" She mewled, "This... this's what it was all for!"

Satsuki heard so much of her own thoughts in that. She held out a hand, and Nonon gratefully took it and came over to the side of the bed. But when she reached to touch, or maybe even hold, Ryuko shot her a feline glare and clutched Nozomi tighter to her breast. *Ah, right,* Nonon kicked herself and hastily pulled back her hand, *It's not all over yet. Ryuko needs to see Nozomi hybridized and until then she won't know that she's safe. I should've known she'd still be scared.*

In point of fact, Ryuko actually felt pretty goddamn good. She was sealed up as if the last nine months had never happened, with her flat belly back and the complete security of a whole and inviolate body. It was all gone, a bad dream like Satsuki had promised, and she relished the return to herself. Well, herself plus a little extra now, and she felt better than ever. Strong, light, agile, and with a delicious warmth suffusing her which she knew was not physical in nature. Holding Nozomi, feeling her, seeing her was such a rush that she almost couldn't believe it. *I made this ?* Senketsu was there, she could feel his presence, and without him she really might not have believed her eyes. *No way she could be so perfect!*

And while the room suddenly crowding up ruined their perfect still moment (and was a bit of a problem since Nozomi was clearly hungry and that would now have to wait) Ryuko was mostly happy to see them. She needed to show Nozomi off. This was a good start; they'd all put it all on the line for her, for this, and just seeing their relief was a joy. *Don't you all love her just as much as me? Okay, maybe not just as much, but almost is good enough.* She was actually quite pleased to see that Nonon was affected so; reflexively she'd been ready for a flippant remark. There was no real reason why she pulled Nozomi back from Nonon's touch.

If she could put it into words, the closest she could get would be, “*No. Mine.*”

But the really important people weren't here yet. First on the list was Mako. Then Mataro, though it was only a hope that he was still alive. And that was the other reason it was good everyone was here. It meant it was time to go. Ryuko was overflowing with energy, jumping like a live wire and barely under control. Her mind raced with plans, everything she needed to do now and which she was now certain was in her grasp. Hybridize Nozomi (there was no longer any doubt in her mind the procedure could fail), kill Minazuki (Ryuko had never doubted she could do that). Then she would find the REVOCS base, boring though it would be to scan across the Earth until she did, and just as she'd promised Nonon bring them down the moment she did. That would be easy. Then she'd make peace with Joe Galton and the Americans - she wasn't sure how she would but she had all the cards and they were gonna know it. And then, it was time to let the whole world see Nozomi, see how perfect she was. And celebrate. Only after all that would she get to see who Nozomi grew up into. What she was really looking forward to. Far from her usual trepidation about the unknown future Ryuko couldn't wait, just *couldn't*, to see what was there beyond her imagination. She had living proof in her hands that she could do even the most impossible seeming things, and do them better than she'd ever hoped. The trickle of the seconds was agonizingly slow

But there was one more thing she had to do first. Senketsu's thoughts snipped at her. Right. First, she had to tell Satsuki everything. What was really at stake, who their real enemy was, and what would really happen to Nozomi when she became a hybrid. And worse than that, she had to tell Satsuki about Ragyo's older sister, and about just how like them they were. She didn't want to do it, but Senketsu was right, it had to be done. *Oh well, what's one more thing? After what I've been through tonight it'll be no trouble at all.*

*[Just be honest and upfront,]* Senketsu said softly, *[You know she'll understand.]* Well, that was probably true.

After a moment considering how she wanted to handle it, Ryuko lifted her head from Nozomi and said, “Alright, you guys ready to do this?”

This took the gathered group by surprise a little, but after some confused blinks and head tilts they all remembered what this was all for in the first place. It was a daunting thought. Nonon was the first to reassert herself, as was her responsibility as the leader, “Yeah, uh, hey Shiro? You ready for the hybridization?” He wasn't there. Nonon stuck her head outside the operating chamber and found him standing facing away from her, rubbing his eyes. “Shi-”

“Yes, yes, the device is prepared!” He blurted back at her. Nonon gave Ryuko a nod.

“Good. Before we do though, I've got some things I've got to talk to Satsuki about, and something I have to tell all of you, too. It'll be quick,” Nobody took the hint, all waiting for their turn to hold Nozomi (if Ryuko let them have one). So she waved her hand in a little sweeping motion, “Well, go on! We'll be right out!” And, anxiously wondering about what could be so important she had to tell them in the precious few moments before hybridization, they filed out.

On her way Nonon stopped and asked, “Do you like, want clothes or anything?”

Ryuko looked down at herself. She hadn't considered it, and could project an outfit easily, but she had some much more pressing issues on her mind. She couldn't decide what outfit to make. What could she wear? Nothing she imagined would fit the moment. Not having to decide sounded good. Plus when she had to let go of Nozomi having something else on her skin - something real - might be nice. “I guess so?”

~ “*We have something of yours you left in the locker room once,*” ~ Izanami’s projected voice offered, ~ “*It’s nothing special,*” ~ Izanami had the sense that perhaps Ryuko should wear something magisterial, something that would fit the monumentality of the moment. Or maybe feeling mighty and unearthly might just make Ryuko feel more confident that the grand experiment would work. Ryuko could see both those points, but on the other hand she wondered if maybe what would really feel right was a more down-to-earth outfit. ~ “*But it is one of your favorites.*” ~

A floor panel opened, a table rose from inside it. Ryuko wasn’t surprised by its contents, she remembered leaving this outfit here as a backup. Jeans, a plain white long-sleeve shirt, and a bomber jacket - black with white sleeves and white trim on the pockets. She’d had this jacket for a long time, it wasn’t the one she’d had when she arrived at Honnouji but she had worn it all the time in the months after Ragyo’s defeat. The outfit was even complete with socks and sneakers and a thin red scarf. Ryuko chuckled to herself at the luck of that. It was like a miniature version of Senketsu at last making contact, another old friend.

Senketsu saw it too, [*How perfect is that!*]

Ryuko gently shifted Nozomi over into Satsuki’s arms and popped to her feet, wasting no time in getting dressed. She sighed, and then before she could begin Satsuki said, “Is this going to be one last ditch effort to make me reconsider the hybridization process? It’s over, she’s safe. I wouldn’t blame you for changing your mind now.” In her arms, Nozomi started to whine again, a feeble and uncertain noise. A little threat of more bawling. Holding her didn’t come quite so instinctively to Satsuki, but she mimicked what she’d seen Ryuko do with her typical force of will and managed to land on just the right gentle touch, the right light bounce. She offered Nozomi a finger to paw at and her complaints died down into a gurgle.

“No! No,” Ryuko shook her head, though the denial seemed a bit hollow to Satsuki.

She softly said, “Because... I’d be willing to hear you out.” She was a little choked up. “Now that she’s here, in my arms, it’s different.”

“I know,” Though she was only wearing her undergarments and jeans at this point, Ryuko stopped getting dressed and went back over, magnetically drawn to admiring Nozomi. “You told me, you and Senketsu both. But I wasn’t ready. I’m not trying to change your mind, Sats. I just need to make sure you understand what we’re getting into.”

Satsuki nodded, seriously mulling that over. “Mmm,” She murmured, “And I wasn’t ready to hear what you were saying. About her being ‘like us’. Of course, you were right. As a hybrid, she’ll be drafted into your war against the life-fibers. Worse, you were hoping to one day abdicate and leave her as Earth’s first protector. Are you still?” Ryuko shrugged, tilted her head back and forth. Another problem, one she hadn’t been thinking about. Right now the possibilities for Nozomi were so wide open - maybe she would want that, maybe she wouldn’t. All Ryuko could do was wait and see for herself. “That would make her the leader, the one who has to make the hard choices. Look at her, she’s so... *pure*. What right do we have to ruin that? But if she stays human, it’s not as if she’ll stay like this either. And she’ll have to fear death,” She held Nozomi tighter, “I wish just that we could wait, just a bit longer. But I think if she got too old and we missed our chance that would be the worst of all.”

“Oh yeah, you’ve got no idea.” She keenly remembered the horrible numb feeling Ragyo had, when she learned Satsuki was too old to undergo hybridization. The immediate death of love. She

knew that wouldn't happen to her. Probably. *But I know exactly how it feels. And I can't risk feeling it myself.* "I'm not gonna disagree with any of that."

"We've thought it through before," Satsuki nodded.

"Yeah. But it's just the start," Ryuko went back to getting dressed, pulling the shirt over her face as she said, "Doesn't change what we've got to do, either."

Satsuki looked up at Ryuko and said, "I'm in awe of you."

"Ah, stop it," That was sincerity meant to make Ryuko blush. And it worked; she studied her jacket as an excuse to break eye contact, "There's no time for that, you sap."

"I mean it. You know better than anyone what hybridization means - for her and for the world - and you're still ready to go. Even after everything you've been through,"

"- Yeah I don't really want to think about that," Ryuko said quickly, "It's done, Sats."

"But you should! Who else could do what you did tonight? Do you think I could? I don't. And that's not about *what* you are, either." Ryuko studiously wrapped her scarf around her neck, wove its ends together. Satsuki said, "Ryuko, what I'm trying to say is that I know you're nervous about whatever you promised Senketsu you'd tell me." With a little smirk she added, "Or you'd have just said it already."

*[She knows how to read you alright.]*

"Ah can it, Senketsu."

"But I won't be upset. I'll bear it as stoically as you have."

Ryuko sighed, "Alright, alright." She was finished now except the sneakers, and she walked over to Satsuki and leaned on the wall to pull them on (the wall that was behind the operating table's headboard was the only surface in the room not slick with blood). "This's what I need you to get. What you said about all that responsibility, it's true, *if* I decide to retire when she comes of age. I said that, but now that I see her I can't just drop that on her. She can decide on her own. If she doesn't want it, someone else will come along. But there's one thing she's not gonna be able to get away from. Our family. So, well, uh," Deep breath, "When are we going to tell her that we're sisters?"

A storm broke on Satsuki's face. Her brow furrowed into shadowy thunderheads, a furious glare struck Ryuko. " *That* is what this is about? Why, of all things, would you bring *that* up now!"

"But you just said -"

"I know what I said, but -," Satsuki stopped herself, reasserted control over her emotions. It wasn't Ryuko she was mad at - she'd just broken their little oath never to acknowledge the truth of their relationship aloud but that was only mildly irksome. It was the truth itself which was poison even to speak in the presence of Nozomi's purity. "But when you spoke of things you've seen with Senketsu and kept from me, I expected something far more... cosmic."

"Oh yeah, there's that too, but I think everyone's got a right to know that and I'm gonna get to it," Ryuko said, making it sound comparatively light. "But this is comin' from things I've seen on the



other side too.”

“Ragyo’s memories,” Satsuki nodded.

“Right. The thing I haven’t told you is that, well, Ragyo had an older sister. She murdered her. And... they loved each other.”

“They *did*?” Satsuki groaned, monumentally disappointed. She sounded to Ryuko as if she’d just had the ending to a TV show spoiled to her. And it stunk.

“Oh what? You knew all the rest already?” Ryuko asked sarcastically.

“Of course,” In spite of everything, Satsuki teased Ryuko by tilting her inflection with smugness. “There were many members of the Kiryuin clan who vanished, but aunt Tora was a would-be heir. Too high profile to be eased from the world’s memory. Knowing Ragyo I surmised the rest. But they were *lovers*! Why would Ragyo kill her, I don’t understand.”

Ryuko deadpanned, “Really? You don’t? How old were they around that point? Seventeen? Eighteen?”

“Oh... I see.”

“And just ‘ta be clear, they weren’t lovers. Even if they were, Ragyo probably still would’ve done it. But can you imagine how *she* would feel? Wanting someone so bad, but unable to have them?”

Satsuki nodded, “Even if it hurt, she couldn’t abide letting her go.” Satsuki definitely understood that jealousy well. Ragyo, untrained in controlling her emotions and unused to not getting what she wanted, would never tolerate it.

“Yeah. To a tee. She killed her mother too, you know.”

“Oh, well I inferred that as well, naturally. That’s just politics,” Satsuki said, head wrapped deeply in the motivations she knew and had surmised behind Ragyo’s trail of bodies. Hunger for power, her mother’s lackadaisical rule, it all seemed like the cold logic that motivated dynastic power struggles throughout human history. Ryuko’s eyes bored into her like lasers, not in anger but in terror, as if Satsuki had just pronounced a horrible truth. In a way, she had. “Ah. I see now, what you’re saying. You killed your mother. You love your older sister, and you hated her, fought her, nearly killed her. When you were the same age she was when she murdered hers. You must have reason to see that as more than coincidence. And now you’re suggesting - what exactly are you suggesting? This is some sort of... cycle? Fate?” The word, the thought that maybe some unseen karmic force was out to get her in the end, gave Satsuki a squeeze of fear, “Are you suggesting she’ll do the same thing?”

“W-well, not that specifically. I don’t know,” Ryuko groaned. Still, Satsuki was obviously concerned by this revelation and that was far better than what Ryuko was afraid of - Satsuki thinking she’d gone insane. “Honestly, she couldn’t, not really. That would mean going over to the life-fibers, and it just doesn’t work like that. They don’t do deals or negotiatin’, not with hybrids. What I mean is... ah hell, I’m not sure what I mean. I wish I did think it was all just a coincidence, but I just can’t. I got this horrible feeling, watching that, feeling what she felt. We were a lot alike, scary alike, when we were kids. Even did her hair like mine.”

“No fox ears?”

“Nah, that came way later,” Ryuko shrugged.

“Huh. Not at all how I pictured it.”

“Well I didn’t picture it how it was either. But we started to diverge, yknow, right around that time. When she became heir to the most powerful corporation on the planet, and my dad got murdered and my house burned down,” Ryuko said. “I mean, you gotta ask yourself, what if Dad hadn’t gotten me away?” Neither of them followed that up. Not a path to go down. “But, uh, if there’s one comfort here it’s that this’s all been going on since before us. Before her. Generations back, even. The life-fibers just wanted to keep their secrets close and bring Ragyo into the world, they didn’t care they were tying our family into this gross, incestuous, knot.”

“The modern day Hapsburgs,” Satsuki said, and Ryuko cracked a smile.

“Knew you were gonna say that,” She chuckled morosely. “It’s more true even than you think. They let Ragyo know about all the shit they’ve done ever since the primordial life-fiber crashed down in Africa back when we were still barely starting fires. Moved up to Egypt when civilization got started, stayed there for a long, long frickin’ time setting up the roots. Then went to Greece, and then to Rome, and then dug in deep in, uh, Istanbul? And started sending out feelers all over if any of these royal bloodlines riddled with their cult members were ready to go to the next level. Thousand years go by, then there’s the revolutions, America and France and all that, and the life-fiber see Europe’s seriously not ready for them and bug out to Asia -”

“- Hold on, with that timing, that would mean the Meiji Restoration, Imperial Japan, World War Two! All of that, because of *them* ?” And far more than that. It wasn’t what she was supposed to be focused on here but it was fascinating nonetheless.

Ryuko said, “I-I don’t know the names of all this stuff, Sats. I guess? I should know what that restoration thing was but it’s not like I paid attention in history class. Not that it’s the point or anything.”

“My head is swimming,” Satsuki murmured. “But I think I see your point. You mentioned what I once said, ‘like her, but better’. Now it seems that is more true than we ever expected,” Quite an understatement, she said it with terse reluctance. “We can’t get away from it, and neither will she. So the least we can do is help her make sense of it all, why we’re like this and... why what we’ve done is wrong but we did it anyway.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Ryuko nodded.

Satsuki really didn’t want to admit it, but she did, “Yes. You’re right, I can see that.”

“Taken with that classic Satsuki good grace.”

That earned Ryuko a hard glare. Nozomi seemed agitated, bubbling out a couple ominous cries as Satsuki’s arms went tense. “You knew this was going to be hard for me. You wouldn’t have even brought it up if it weren’t for Senketsu. And now you’re making fun of me for it.”

“I’m not! Geez, it’s just a joke!” Ryuko shot back. Nozomi immediately started bawling again.

“I - ah - Ryuko, you - here!” She stood and thrust Nozomi at Ryuko in a panic. Ryuko took her, immediately setting to work hushing as best she could. It was an agonizing minute until they could

speak once more. Once she had quieted again, Ryuko stood close to Satsuki and nudged her into her arms. Satsuki crossed her arms and didn't take her back. "No, I can't."

"Aw, Sats! You seemed like you were enjoying it and all!" Ryuko frowned.

"I feel filthy," Satsuki said, "Holding her, talking about this. About what she could do in the future, how when she knows that we're... sisters, it could change how she sees us forever," Another understatement. "As if she was a time bomb."

"That ain't how I meant it," Ryuko said gently, putting her hand on Satsuki's forearm, "It's scary, it really is, but if you're thinkin' about 'is she meant to be you, because she's our first kid, or is she me because she's got my DNA, and what's that mean she's gonna do?' I've already thought it to death with Senketsu. I don't see it. I mean look at us. We worked it out, didn't kill each other, and when Ragyo bit it she did it herself. If I'm meant to be her, I got everything she wanted. And none of that was in the life-fibers' big plan."

"Hmm. Whatever it is they seem to want, you'll make sure it doesn't happen, won't you?" Satsuki said, rather consoled by the thought.

"As if you need to ask," Ryuko smirked. "The way I see it, we've already broken their grip on our fate. Who she grows up into," Looking down at Nozomi, it felt so much more natural to picture the child Senketsu had shown her - who she would become - rather than this brief transitional period, "I just want to make sure she can decide herself."

"You're quite optimistic about all this," Satsuki said.

That came off a little more skeptical to Ryuko than she meant it. Ryuko sheepishly said, "Yeah well, shit changed the moment I got her outta me and back to my old self. I mean, I really never, ever thought I could be a mother. I just couldn't see it. But here I am! Here we are." Satsuki was struck by the sight of her, the palpable excitement behind her words. She wasn't much for looking forward to the future without knowing what would be there. Plans, not possibilities, were her preference. Usually.

*Why shouldn't she be optimistic? She knows more than I about what we're about to do, and if she thinks it will work out okay, then it will.*

"Okay. Enough of this," She said, "I've thought it over. Sixteen or so, give or take. Then we tell all."

"Wha - *sixteen!*" Ryuko gasped with mouth wide open. She laughed a little, it was so unexpected it was almost a joke "Sats, what the hell? That's way too late! I was thinking more like, I dunno, five. Soon as she can get the concept."

Now it was Satsuki's turn to recoil, with furrowed brows and crinkled nose, "No, no I can't countenance that. She needs to be old enough to, well, to have gotten to sex ed. in school, frankly. She needs to be able to take the whole story in, understand what happened to us, what Ragyo did. We can't risk her growing up thinking its normal, she might babble out the truth without even knowing what she was doing!" Ryuko frowned - she hadn't considered that. "And if her childhood is warped by having that secret hanging over her head, that would be even worse. No, she needs maturity before she can handle it."

“Right, because findin’ out I was a Kiryuin in my teens really did wonders on me,” Ryuko rolled her eyes.

“And learning the truth about Ragyo at four was just a cakewalk for me, huh?” Satsuki retorted.

“Well that’s - hm,” That shut Ryuko up. She put her hand on her chin and stared thoughtfully past Nozomi and then said, “So, um, what? Maybe we split the difference?” Satsuki took out her phone, and Ryuko tilted her head to peer around it, “What, what are you doing?”

“I’m looking it up.”

“No you’re not,” Ryuko watched her type out *\*when to tell child they are adopted\**, and said, “Oh, I gotcha.”

“ ‘As soon as possible. Even if they don’t understand,’ “ Satsuki read. They both looked down at Nozomi. She looked back at them, eyes a bit wider open now, beaming at them without any comprehension.

“Well, alright then,” Ryuko chuckled, “Guess we’ve already done that.”

“Yes, it doesn’t really help us. So, split the difference? Ten?”

“I - I mean... sure. For now. That’s good enough. Really the important thing is that we do it.”

## Chapter End Notes

Write what you know right? Well I don’t have kids so this took quite some imagination.

# To Be Born Inhuman

October 2068

~~~~~  
5:50am  
~~~~~

Lucille's consciousness returned to her in fits and starts. She jolted awake with a yelp, a delayed reaction to her last glimpse of Mataro rushing at her. But there she was, not dead. Her wide eyes flicked around, taking in a flat plain of concrete, the rectangular plinth she was seated in the corner of, the two nondescript buildings on either side, and a huddled group around a hospital bed right in front of her. But she didn't process it. Her head was swimming, the shock of losing her Ultima Uniform was still crushing down on her. There was only long enough for thoughts of sleep to soothe her frazzled nerves before she subsided.

The next time, she awoke to a hushed, urgent argument.

Shiro was holding Houka's hand, whispering excitedly, "It is possible, actually. I could bring him around if I cut off the morphine drip. But -"

"- Well if it's possible, then you should do it!" Nonon hissed, leaning over Houka. Lucille recognized her first and the rest right after, and it crushed her with terror. Her jaw clenched, barely comprehending what she was hearing and thinking only about not drawing their attention to her.

She need not have worried, they had much more important things than her to worry about. Rei said, "No! It's too risky!"

"Not necessarily," Shiro shrugged.

"You were just adding a 'but'. But what?" Rei countered.

"But the reason he'll wake up is from the pain," Shiro said. "He would be in agony."

"That's not good," Tsumugu said, "If it's painful enough, he could go into shock. And if he doesn't, he could hurt himself by thrashing. We'd have to restrain him."

Aikuro added, "That aside, I don't think he'd really get much from the experience. It's a shame, but it's best to leave him like he is."

"Oh bullshit," Nonon groaned, "It's worth the pain for him. If you were in his shoes, you wouldn't want to miss this would you?"

"I know I wouldn't. He'd be disappointed later," Shiro declared, "I'm doing it."

"Shiro..." Rei might have protested a little more, but all of them turned to look down at Houka as if he was speaking. For an eerie moment Lucille heard nothing.

*[I'll help him,]* Misaki said. Her computer components were still in complete disarray so she did not use her artificial voice. Her telepathic voice was groggy too, a groan depressed by sympathetic reaction to Houka's drug-addled brain, *[He won't struggle... I can keep him focused. Please, we both want to be here for this.]*

"Oh alright," Rei relented. "I suppose I'd feel guilty about that later too." A few of the monitors next to Houka's bed beeped as his heart rate rose and his breathing became shallower. The half of his face not covered by bandages twitched. They all frowned, but after a few seconds nothing else happened and it seemed he had adjusted to the increased pain.

*They haven't noticed me at all!* Lucille realized at last. It wasn't really that comforting. *They don't even care that I'm here! I-I'm no threat to them at all!* She was still absolutely terrified, and her headache and general soreness were a huge distraction, but she briefly tried to figure out if she could run. No such luck. Before Ryuko and Satsuki arrived, Shiro had procured a restraining chair for her. After he strapped her into it, Mataro and everyone else had forgotten all about her but the metal cuffs that bound her wrists and ankles were effective enough on their own. Even if she could escape, where would she run? There was nowhere to hide on the flat concrete that stretched away on all sides, and beyond it the high-velocity life-fiber barrier and its emitter wall looked utterly impenetrable. She was trapped.

*What are they going to do to me!* Her mind raced with possibilities, each more horrific and outlandish than the last. When she pictured herself in Houka's place, with them leering down at her as she was dissected, that was too much. She passed out from fright.

The last time she came to, Lucille had physically recovered. Soreness dissipated and made her body feel light and warm despite the cool breeze. But with her mental faculties back in full, it was the most horrible yet. She now fully appreciated her situation - captured but forgotten - and there was nothing she could do but wait.

The Kamui Corps seemed excited. That was probably even more frightening to Lucille, their sense of nervous anticipation meant something truly dreadful was about to happen. Listening in to their chatter, she pieced it together. There were two nondescript buildings to either side of the plinth they were all on, windowless single story structures that emerged from the same white concrete as the floor. One was rectangular, the other five-sided. Ryuko and Satsuki were in the four-sided one now - *They're **here**!* The knowledge made Lucille yelp though she was trying as hard as possible to be silent and draw no attention. Ryuko and Satsuki were in there with... Nozomi, who was that? And they were discussing something very important. When they came out, all of them were going into the five-sided building, and that was when *it* was going to happen. They all seemed to know what it was, but were so in awe of it they didn't actually say what it was.

"I guess I just still haven't accepted it," Aikuro sighed, "This is going to be all of our last memory of a time before our entire species changed forever. It's such a monumental decision, and nobody but us even knows it's happening right now."

"And yet," Tsumugu said, "We must."

Aikuro smiled at his friend, "Yeah, we must."

"Well, *I* for one accepted it way back in Indonesia," Nonon bragged with shrill self-satisfaction. But then she chuckled at herself and said, "But really, Satsuki said something back then that made me realize. It's not getting rid of the life-fibers, it's whether we can live with them or if they're our enemies. We already made our choice," she patted Saiban, "This is just the next step on that path."

“Hmm. You think Ryuko sees it that way too?”

“She does,” Nonon smirked, “I’d say I’ve probably gotten a little bit of a preview of what Ryuko’s going to drop on you now.” Shiro tilted his head curiously, “So did you, actually. Y’know, what you saw when Ranketsu attacked you.”

“I don’t know what I saw,” Shiro said grumpily. Nonon was going to protest that he shouldn’t have let Ranketsu rattle his confidence, but he went on, “Honestly, I didn’t see very much. He’s the one who did everything,” He nodded at Houka.

“Then I hope he’s listening,” Nonon said.

*Change the entire species!* Lucille shuddered, *They’ve always said they do it all for the people, but we know better! And there’s the proof!*

But Lucille didn’t have any more time to ponder. The door to the four-sided room opened. The Kamui Corps all popped to their feet. “Ryuko!” Nonon gasped. And the feeling drained from her body in a wave of raw panic.

*No! No please!* Lucille squeezed her eyes shut, squirming against her chains in a raw, animalistic effort to be free of her bindings. Footsteps clicked on the concrete.

“How’re you feeling?”

“Great! Uh, well, scared for Mako and Mataro, but aside from that.” Lucille’s eyes popped back open. That wasn’t the voice she was expecting at all. And then she saw Ryuko, and the whole world went askew.

Mataro had just been an ordinary boy, so maybe she shouldn’t have been surprised. But *that* was Ryuko? She looked so... normal. Besides the faint reds in her hair, she could have been just any young lady on the street, complete with admittedly well paired but totally unassuming scarf, jacket, and jeans. *She wears jeans?* Lucille stopped squirming and watched, stunned.

Ryuko looked over to Satsuki with a big smile, and Satsuki added, “As ready as we’re going to be. So, quite good, overall.” Satsuki sounded different too. Lucille had heard her speak before, both before she turned traitor and since in enemy propaganda. But there was serenity and gentleness there she wasn’t used to hearing. She at least looked the part, wearing a low-cut dress with a kimono-like pattern that Lucille knew instinctively was made of life-fibers. For some reason, she was speckled all over with blood whereas Ryuko’s natural fabric clothes and the white bundle in her hands were clean. *What is that she’s carrying?*

All at once it hit her. The real thing about Ryuko that wasn’t right. She wasn’t pregnant. And that meant the thing she was carrying was - *No, it can’t be!*

Lucille had to fight very hard not to scream.

But everyone crowded around Ryuko and Satsuki, still completely not caring that she was thrashing around in the corner. “You seem to have recovered as quick as ever,” Aikuro said.

Ryuko hugged him, beaming. “Course! What was I gonna do, get ‘bed rest’?” She scoffed. “Now, how’s this all gonna work?”

Shiro backed up and waved his hand, presenting the five-sided building to them, “The device is in there. I, ah, I expect you’ll want to be present for the entire procedure. The surgery to place the implant needles will be automated and take just a minute, and once it’s done we’ll know if the attachment worked basically immediately. If it didn’t, the safety shutdown will undo the surgery and stitch Nozomi up, no harm done.”

Ryuko and Satsuki both looked a little perplexed. Satsuki said, “Shiro, you know that we both believe without a doubt it will work. We trust you.”

“It won’t be done until it’s done.”

“Yeah I feel that,” Ryuko put a hand on his shoulder. Shiro flinched back - Nozomi was just too close, and seeing her as a real, living being and not a theoretical caused a painful jump in his heart he was not ready to deal with. “What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing,” Shiro glanced over at Houka with a thin smile, “Long day.” Ryuko saw where he was looking and understood.

“Feel that too,” She chuckled, and then addressing the group said, “So I’ll keep this short, but before we start there’s some things you all need to know. Things I should have told you before but, well, I guess I just thought they’d be too hard to bear. I’m sorry for that. But you do deserve to know what we’re really up against.”

“After tonight,” Ryuko began, “Our fight against REVOCS is over. I promised that once Nozomi was here I would take care of everything and I meant that. I’m gonna kill Minazuki, I’ll track down the REVOCS main base and force them to surrender, then we’ll settle some kind of peace treaty or whatever with the Americans so they stop freaking out.” Nobody brought up any objections, though Nonon and Yuda shared the thought of, *Surrender? That’s too good for them. I know Ryuko’s feeling magnanimous now, but they have to die.* But that was something Nonon would broach later. “If only that meant it was all over, and we had finally, really saved the world from the life-fibers. But we all know that ain’t true. The fact is that we fucked with something way bigger than us, and even getting rid of REVOCS won’t change the fact that they’re still out there. I’ve seen it, and Saiban saw it too, but only partially. If you’ve ever wondered if the life-fibers really have done what they did to Earth on other planets before, I’ll tell you right now they did. But there’s more.”

The group was circled around Ryuko, leaning on Houka’s bed or a corner pillar or sitting in one of a few simple metal chairs. Aikuro sat in his chair backwards, arms leaned on the back, legs spread wide. He shuffled up attentively, and then gave Ryuko a little eyebrow quirk, “Hey, knock that off! This is serious!” Ryuko said indignantly, though with a smile.

“Oh, like that stopped you,” Aikuro shot back. Tsumugu cracked a short chuckle and the others looked at each other, perplexed.

“What are you guys talking about?” Nonon asked.

“Ah nothing,” Ryuko waved it off. “Old joke. But I get it. Truth is, there were a lot of things even back in the Honnouji days where you knew how the life-fibers worked, but you didn’t know *why*. See, when I’m talking about the life-fiber network, I’m not just imagining a kind of psychic link between them. There are actual, physical connections in other dimensions. The primordial life-



fiber didn't come to earth like a comet flying alone through space, it was just the end of a long tentacle that pokes through into the world you can see," To illustrate her point, Ryuko held one hand flat and then poked the index finger of the other in between two fingers. "I've seen it. It's like, like a fabric, only we're microscopic compared to it. Knots wrapping around stars, threads connecting them. Up close, you can see all these different components in it, some like crystals, others big blobby things made of meat, but it stretches far, far away into the depths of space in every direction. In the distance, it comes together into patterns and almost looks flat, like lace. You can feel it, caging you in. Battering at you," She murmured, caught up in the image of it. Most of the group had no real way to picture what she described, but just from the haunted tone of her voice they felt like they did. The scope of it, the universal scale, the fact that Ryuko shuddered to picture it was enough.

"Any clothes with life-fibers in them are part of it too. The enemy Kamui, Covers, all the different Uniform levels, and all of REVOCS' old clothing. They have their own connecting thread on the other side too. Really, you could look at them as just the little device at the end made to connect with their human host. You all work - kind of - like that by the way," She inclined her head towards Aikuro, specifically towards his Nekketsu's eye in front of his shoulder. "Yeah. I see the bonds between you as real things, too. You've each got your own little linking thread and those end in, well, you guys," She went from a nod towards Nekketsu to one towards Aikuro. "That's what allows you to communicate, and where your power comes from. Or no, more like how your power comes into our world."

"Yes..." Everyone jumped when Houka suddenly rasped out. There was a kind of reverence in it that startled Ryuko most of all, as she rapidly put together that since Ranketsu had attacked him, he knew *exactly* what she was talking about. Obviously the discovery mattered far more to him than his wounds. He was staring at Ryuko, but his eye and Misaki's were both glazed over and when he tried to say more it came out in a slurred mumble.

With a pang of guilt, Ryuko thought, *he deserves the full answer*, and steeled herself to just come right out with it like she had with Satsuki. "But there's something else out there. Something bigger and more powerful. It's - you don't see it, at first. When *you* look out into space, you see the stars and then the black background between them. On the other side, I see the life-fiber network, forming hubs around the stars and threads connecting them, and then through the holes in that I see *it*. It is the background. That's its skin!" Ryuko saw furrowed eyebrows and pursed-lipped concentration and was worried for a second that she wasn't being believed.

"So... we're inside this thing?" Shiro asked. "You're saying that the edge of the universe, so to speak, is a gigantic living boundary?" He cupped his hands and then rotated them around to make an upside-down cup, representing a hollow spherical shape.

"N-no, not the edge," Ryuko responded. "It's not out in every direction, there's way too many directions."

"I see..."

"It's more like the life-fibers surround it, not the other way around. It's still so huge that you can't see where it ends though. It's just like a living wall, crushing down onto the universe. It has eyes, and mouths, and *teeth*! And this is the really important part, the life-fibers feed it. Yeah. They have these long tubes, like straws, that go out from some of their hubs and then into the mouths. That's what their harvests are for, for feeding *it*. They feed it our souls!"

Now that was a bit harder for her audience to swallow. Satsuki and Tsumugu expressed surprise in their stoic way, just a slight tilt back in their postures. Aikuro and Yuda frowned as if tasting something sour. Rei actually laughed nervously, hoping Ryuko was speaking metaphorically somehow. Nonon, who knew what was coming, stayed leaning on Houka's bed with her arms crossed. Shiro spoke for all of them. "... *What?* "

"Where the life-fibers connect with a human, it's in the part of them that's not in this dimension. Something else you were right about, there's part of humans, of every living creature, that crosses over into the other side. It's like... hell, I can't describe it, it's like your shadow, this kind of amorphous... thing made from some kinda flesh and little glowing points of light. They cover the whole planet and you almost can't tell where one ends and another begins."

"And you think *those* are our souls?" Rei asked skeptically. "You're saying you know what happens when we die!"

"Well, uh, yes. I do," Ryuko said, "At least, that's what I call them. That's what I think they are. They definitely have some connection to your brains, they record your memories... personalities. But I can't say what they do, what the point of them is. What I do know is that when someone dies, the life-fibers *take* them!"

"Hold on," Satsuki said, "I don't understand. You told me that when we die, that dissipates back into the planet."

"And it does, usually," Ryuko said quickly, "But if someone dies wearing clothes with life-fibers in them, it snags them instead. That's when they get taken, and then they're channeled into the life-fibers, mixed with all the souls from other worlds, and then fed into *it* . And that's what it's all for. If you're wondering about, like, 'don't they also harvest the actual planet in some way?', that's only just to sustain themselves. We're what they're really after."

It was a lot to take in. Ryuko waited with bated breath; they all glowered alarmingly and she wished she had told them sooner. Eventually Yuda said, "So it's like a deal with the devil. All the power, but with your soul in exchange. Holy... I wore one of those things at Krakatoa!" He laughed because it was too late to freak out about it, though the residual terror of how close he'd come to damnation made him shudder, "And you all, you guys went up against Ragyo in Goku Uniforms and Junketsu! Jesus *Christ* !" Nonon patted him on the back. But the true scale of what Ryuko was saying gradually dawned on him. "Hold on," He said very seriously, "You said *any* clothes with life-fibers in them. Right?" Ryuko nodded. "But the life-fibers have been around, influencing our civilization since the beginning, haven't they? Most clothing throughout all history probably had at least *some* life-fibers in it. Right?" Again, a nod. "Then, just about every human who ever died before you killed Ragyo was snatched, is that what you're saying?" He said it in a high, panicked voice. Looking around at the rest of the group, like statues with drawn faces and hard eyes, it was clear they all had come to the same conclusion.

"... Yes. That's what I couldn't bring myself to tell you all this time. I'm sorry," Ryuko said. She admired their strength, to not immediately start crying or freaking out. She'd panicked for an entire eon when she first saw it. But then, they still couldn't fully understand.

"No, no that can't be right!" Yuda protested. But he was alone in that.

"But why, Ryuko? Why didn't you tell me?" Satsuki asked. She actually sounded hurt more than anything.

“Satsuki-”

“You let me believe that death was a - I don’t know, a passive event,” Satsuki said. “I took some comfort from that! Only now do you tell me that before *us*, death meant... this!” She said it venomously, but softly. Holding Nozomi and being so aware that she might stir at any moment put a firm limit on her volume

“Yeah Ryuko, what the fuck!” Aikuro shot up from his chair, furious.

*Don’t throw it,* Ryuko thought to herself, though she wouldn’t dare to try diffusing the situation.

“You know how many REVOCS soldiers we’ve killed? All of us? And now you tell us we personally sent them all to feed this thing?” He railed at her, “Is this why you haven’t been taking part in this war?”

“No! You know there’s been other reasons!”

“Aikuro chill out man,” Nonon said, failing at not sounding dismissive, “You know why she didn’t tell you. It would have only made it harder to do what you needed to do!”

“Give me a break. Don’t act like you feel nothing!” Aikuro said.

“That’s not what I meant,” Nonon’s tone softened. “Of course it fucks with me. But we had to fight them, or everyone else would die with them. And frankly, they made their bed. Even if they were deceived, they did still want to kill our entire species.”

Shiro added, “This is hard, so I’ll be the one to say it. We saved billions from their fate. And even more billions who will come after us. I know you may not agree with this, you certainly didn’t during your Nudist Beach days, but there is no moral cost too great in exchange for that. Not to mention that so many more were taken before Honnouji, REVOCS is just a drop in the bucket.”

Nonon nodded, “Yeah. It is hard, but it’s true.”

Aikuro sighed, “I’m not even saying you’re wrong. It’s not about that. Think about this war. All our triumphs, all our battles. Fighting as one with our kamui. With my own hands I killed them. I took pride in it! We had fun doing it!” He exclaimed. “I’m ashamed of myself. Aren’t you? Big damn heroes we were, not knowing what we were really doing.” Ryuko hung her head. This was exactly what she was scared of.

“Does it really make that much of a difference to you?” Shiro asked, more out of curiosity than anything. “You didn’t know what happened to the people you killed before, the possibility still existed.”

“Of course it makes a difference! I mean, I didn’t think I *knew* but I always assumed that nothingness was the most likely possibility. But even that would be better than the reality!” Aikuro said. Nobody said anything, and on consideration Aikuro said, “I suppose you’ll tell me you’ve all been struggling with the question since high school.” He shook his head and chuckled morosely, “‘No moral cost too great’. Well goddamn you guys, and goddamn the fucking life-fibers - I never in my life thought I would see your point!”

“Hey!” Nonon shouted.

“Aikuro, I didn’t mean it like that,” Shiro protested.

But Satsuki said, “I understand, Aikuro. I always considered it quite possible that I sent the slain to some form of divine punishment,” That was a surprise, Satsuki had never spoken so openly about her beliefs to any of them besides Ryuko. “However, they are not the worst of it. It’s the innocent dead of Honnouji I can never forgive myself for. Of course, now we find out that their innocence is irrelevant,” She said tersely, “There is no judgment, just raw, mechanical fact - some people are taken, others are not. I suppose that’s good news for *me*, after all if hell was real, that’s where I would be going, but -,” Another thing she had never told even Ryuko, and she immediately regretted saying it too. “My apologies. I should not have said that... I need time to process this.”

“Satsuki, come on,” Nonon said, “Hearing you thought you were going to hell is probably the least surprising secret you’ve ever told me.”

“That’s not important now,” Satsuki turned back to Ryuko, “This information is long overdue.”

Aikuro added, “Yeah, that’s right. What could have possibly possessed you to not tell us this?”

“Well, only this exact reaction!” Ryuko responded defensively, “How was I supposed to tell you! I know I should have, especially you, Satsuki. But I used to think that maybe Dad was out there, proud of us, and yeah that was a comforting thought. He’s not. He was taken too.”

Satsuki stood and went over to Ryuko and put a hand on her arm, “But we could have shared that grief together! Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do?”

“Ah geez, Sats,” Ryuko sniffed.

“You were planning on telling us eventually, right?” Aikuro asked.

“Well, I guess,” Ryuko said.

But Nonon saw through that, “You didn’t really have a plan to ever tell us, did you?” She asked. “Were you planning on dealing with this after we were dead?”

“... Yeah.”

“Not cool, Ryuko,” Aikuro glowered.

“Well what’s the difference?” Ryuko protested, “This thing’s so big it hasn’t even noticed us! It won’t affect you any!”

“Well what if we wanted to help you fight it?” Aikuro shouted back. At this point Nozomi stirred again and began crying. There wasn’t much any of them could do about that but Ryuko wasn’t going to argue any more. They needed to end this fast. “And that doesn’t even matter! We’ve got a right to know. We’re grown-ups, we can handle it. You don’t get to decide what we know just to spare our feelings!”

“You know, this feels familiar,” Nonon said, “You’ve got a bit of a habit for hiding things when you think it’ll piss someone off.”

“What, when else?”

“She never told me she liked my music for some psycho reason,” Nonon shrugged.

“Well, sure it seems harmless with something unimportant like that -,” Aikuro said.

“Hey! It was important!”

“- But you can’t do that anymore, understand?” Aikuro said. Ryuko nodded vigorously.

“Yeah, totally,” Ryuko said. “I’m sorry. I-I’ll do better. Senketsu will help me.”

Nonon came between the two of them and said, “Look, this isn’t all on her. When she told Saiban and me, it made sense that you all weren’t ready. So we’re sorry too.”

*[It’s true,]* Saiban said.

That all was the best Aikuro could ask for. He was still reeling, but of course Ryuko was telling the truth about why she’d hid it. It was pitiful in a way. She was on her own with the secrets of the universe. He took a deep breath. Then he said to Tsumugu, “You’ve been awfully quiet. How does this sit with you?”

Tsumugu looked up from his thoughts. “I’ve got two things I want to know. One: This new lifeform you’ve discovered, what do you call it? Two: How do you plan to destroy it?”

“You guys,” Ryuko groaned and tilted her head back, but relented “I call it: ‘The Thing Behind the Veil.’”

“Hmm, suitably ominous,” Tsumugu nodded.

“But the other thing, this is why I couldn’t just tell you! You still don’t understand the scope of... of the problem. This isn’t the sort of thing you can help with. And I can’t just go leaping down its throat either. It’s different this time,” Ryuko said sadly.

It was disconcerting to see Ryuko so unconfident in her abilities - or at least not totally heedless of the danger. He tried to smile, “Well why not? It’s worked for you before.”

“Because you just don’t understand. You can’t. I-it is on another level, even beyond the life-fibers. You can feel its presence, its *breath*, weighing down on everything,” Ryuko ranted, “We’re like plankton to a whale, you can’t even imagine!”

“Ah, plankton, yes!” Houka spoke again, feverishly excited. Once again all eyes were on him. Before he had just startled everyone, but this was alarming and too unlike him. Ryuko in particular looked scared - if he saw too much, was it possible he couldn’t handle it? “I *knew* they looked familiar! We are the energy and they, the base of the foodchain! They are the base, and there are levels above even them! it’s turtles, all the way down!” He broke into a whining, hysterical giggle.

“What? What does that mean?” Rei asked.

“I wish I knew,” Shiro said, quite sincerely. “Ryuko? Does that make any sense?”

“I think... yeah, it does, a bit. Is he going to be okay?” Ryuko asked.

“He’s still got a lot of painkillers in his system,” Nonon calmed her, “He’s just loopy.”

“Oh.” *Loopy or not, he’s got some whole different way of understanding it than Nonon and Saiban did! Guess I shouldn’t be surprised.*

Nonon pressed on, “But you do plan on destroying The Thing, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah,” Ryuko blurted out. In another circumstance, she might have been annoyed at Nonon for needling her like that, as if she hadn’t heard all this before. Instead she thought, *Ah, she’s got me there. Anyway, it would probably be worse for everyone if they thought I’d given up.*

“So spill it!”

“The plan is we starve it out. Senketsu has absorbed Shinra Koketsu, he’s learning how to access its power. When he does, he can seize control of the life-fiber network and make it stop. It’ll be like when we used Shinra Koketsu’s power to reverse the cocoon sphere, only across the entire network. No more souls,” Ryuko said. Put like that, again Ryuko thought it sounded too easy.

The others did too this time. “Hold on,” Rei said, “That sounds like the true problem solved right then and there. No more life-fibers, no more worlds destroyed. Is that possible?” She was excited, “Could we make contact with alien civilizations that you and Senketsu saved?”

That was a kind of overwhelming question, it didn’t sound real to Ryuko and she would never promise it, “I-I don’t know! The plan doesn’t go that far. It only goes up to launching the attack, and if The Thing Behind the Veil hits back, well, I’m gonna *try* and fight it. I guess.”

“Yeah, it would be too optimistic to hope something that large would bite it from one missed dinner,” Aikuro said. “So, what kind of fight are we talkin’? Do you think The Thing Behind the Veil will play by the same rules as the life-fibers? Fight us on our turf?” The whole group had largely slipped into tactical mode once Ryuko laid out the plan. Seeing them mulling over what little information they had made Ryuko want to punch something.

Shiro nodded, “It may. So far the life-fibers seem to think it’s necessary to cut some kind of anchor that connects us to the earth either by destroying all life on it or by fighting us hand to hand. However, The Thing could potentially choose an alternate vector of attack, so to speak. Through another level of reality. Hmm... Tonight, Houka showed us it was possible for a Kamui to somehow translocate its wearer to another dimension. Maybe we can replicate that, strike out in advance?”

“I think there’s still too many unknowns,” Tsumugu grunted, “No fault of yours, Ryuko. But what would we even be fighting? If it doesn’t have its life-fiber network, what would it send to attack us? More to the point, why only use Shinra Koketsu to starve it? If Senketsu can seize and dismantle the rest of the network, why not go for the heart at the same time?”

“That won’t work,” Nonon cut in.

“Why not?”

*[Because the life-fibers and The Thing Behind the Veil aren’t the same. Couldn’t be less so,]*

Saiban finished the thought for her. That got everyone’s attention but when they looked expectantly at Nonon, Saiban said, *[Uh, Satsuki can’t hear me.]*

~ “Say no more,” ~ Izanami said, and a floor panel popped open to raise up a table with one of the “kamui microphones” on it before she’d even finished (this was, after all, where they were made).

Nonon started clipping it on and said, “Well go on, Ryuko. Tell ‘em.”

So Ryuko did. “That’s something I only figured out after putting the pieces together from Saiban’s vision. See, Rosuketsu talked to him almost like an equal. Made a case for him to come back, rejoin the life-fiber network.”

~ *[A very bad case,]* ~ He added, now using the artificial voice everyone could hear, ~ *[But that was what was so interesting about it.]* ~

“It showed him a history of the universe. A time before the life-fiber network came to be, when life-fibers didn’t harvest souls and destroy planets,” Ryuko said, and that earned a chorus of confused murmurs. “Yeah, weird, right? Seems like back then, the life-fibers were somehow able to gain energy from living things like plants soaking up the sun, without messing with ‘em. They would just float around the planets. And they didn’t create civilizations either, in fact I don’t think there were any, uh, people around at all back then.”

“How long ago was this?” Shiro asked, totally floored. He needed to know more.

Ryuko shrugged, and Saiban said, ~ *[ ‘A time that no longer exists’. That’s what I got.]* ~

“And what the hell does that mean?”

~ *[Good question. But here’s where it gets really interesting. Going from that to the life-fibers we know now wasn’t something they chose, or even - I don’t know - evolved to naturally. Rosuketsu called it a gift, from a ‘generous one’. That could only be The Thing! It domesticated them!]* ~

“That’s right,” Ryuko nodded, “Rosuketsu sold it like that was a good thing. Before that point, the life-fibers hadn’t been one big network but thousands of separate beings. They didn’t exactly play nice, either.”

~ *[They devoured each other. Ryuko says what I saw is a close fit for what we look like on the other side, but there was no sense of kinship between them. No resonance. They had no use for one another and it seems taking energy from each other was more... expedient than harvesting it from life. They were like animals,]* ~ He said with a scorn the other kamui fully understood. ~ *[So from Rosuketsu’s perspective, unifying into the network was an improvement. They want to grow and expand, and without conflict they could grow far greater than they were before. But here’s the real kicker, the life-fibers don’t **know** The Thing Behind the Veil is there! I know, it sounds strange, but it’s true. In my vision, I could feel it there, but not see it. In fact that was one of the things I went to Ryuko to ask about.]* ~

“Yeah, you don’t understand how weird it is. It’s like they aren’t allowed to see it! Like if they knew, the life-fibers would try to resist. They think they’re at the peak, the apex predators of creation, but they’re really just its harvesters. And when we absorb life-fibers, we don’t have to *do* anything. They come to us! It’s like they know, deep down, that they’re not supposed to be that way. You see what I’m sayin’? The life-fibers aren’t our real enemy. They’re its *slaves*.”

Stunned silence followed, until Satsuki said, “Then, this is wonderful news!” The others didn’t look so sure, so she said, “Isn’t it? This means that we can put our misgivings about using the life-fibers, making kamui, and making hybrids to bed for good. We’ve all wondered sometimes if there was some element of corruption, of temptation and subterfuge from the enemy, in our course. And you used to be especially opposed to even studying life-fibers,” She said to Ryuko, “This is what changed your mind, isn’t it?”

“Well no, it was that making you all went so perfect that changed my mind,” Ryuko said, and the kamui all glowed back in response, “This just gave me the why. Still though, you’ve got that right,” It was an immense relief that Satsuki understood. Just by looking at how her face fell, Ryuko could tell she also understood that this meant their daughter would spend her eternal life fighting a potentially unwinnable war. But to Satsuki, that she was fighting on the right side made that far easier to swallow. *Hell, if that’s the reaction I got, I should have told her sooner!*

“Then, it sounds like we have good reason to expand the kamui corps, and continue with the hybridization project too,” Aikuro said. “After all, I’d say that for going up against something that mind controls the cosmic being that’s been controlling all of human civilization from the start, even Ryuko’s power level is not high enough. We’re going to need to continue culturing large amounts of life-fibers too.”

“So glad to hear you say that,” Shiro said smoothly - he was very into this plan, “And of course, we’re going to need our veteran warriors to train and lead them.”

“And we’ll need The League to be revitalized and running more efficiently than ever before. Not just to supply and support you, but also so they don’t see themselves as weapons,” Rei said with a nod to Ryuko, “And so that they see themselves as humans and respect the civilization they’re fighting for.”

“Knock that off!” Ryuko whisper-screamed at them (Satsuki had barely managed to hush Nozomi again), “You guys still don’t get it! It’ll take hundreds, maybe thousands of years before Senketsu is ready with Shinra Koketsu! None of you will ever see it happen.”

That deflated most of them a little bit. But Tsumugu just crossed his arms and said, “So?”

“SO?”

“He’s got a point, Ryuko,” Satsuki said softly. “It’s all the more reason for them to act now.”

“Sats!” Ryuko was scandalized.

“Well it’s true! I’d like to believe that our daughter would live a peaceful life forever, instead of having to fight for it. But she has to fight, the alternative is that you *both* die. Besides, everything they said we were going to do anyway, only perhaps a little less vigorously.”

“Exactly,” Tsumugu said.

“Well, did you think I hadn’t thought of all that too? Just let me take care of it!” Ryuko said, coming to the foot of Houka’s bed so she was in the exact middle of the little circle.

“But why?” Rei asked, “We’re right here, we want to help.”

“So that we can live our lives! See, this is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you,” Ryuko was at this point desperate for them to just get it already, and she pleaded with them, “I just want to be able to enjoy the time I have with you all. After REVOCS is done for, we can have peace. Don’t you want that?”

*[But this is part of our lives too, Ryuko,]* Reiketsu said.



*[That's right,] Nekketsu chimed in, [Think about it from our perspective. If you hadn't told us, we'd have lived an entire human lifetime thinking we'd saved the world. Only to find out it was a lie. And we wouldn't even have our human to help us deal with that. Now that would be messed up.]*

Maybe that was Senketsu's point all along, Ryuko thought. "That's true," She admitted simply, "I hadn't thought of it like that. I'm sorry. But still, now that you know, can't you all just let it be?" It was obvious she wasn't going to win them over now

In a conciliatory tone, Nonon said, "Well, what is it you want to do? Have barbeques on your patio? Do martial arts with us? Walk your girl to school?"

"Well... I guess so, yeah?"

"Well there'll still be time for all that," Nonon said, "You really think there won't? Hell, you got married during this last war! In fact I don't even really get this, you didn't even really fight much during this war," Her tone was rapidly becoming less conciliatory, "Are you just trying to look out for us? Because if so that's nice, but we're all like, good with it. We chose this."

"No, no it's not that complex," Ryuko shook her head, "Senketsu just thought we ought to tell you, so you'd understand how serious making Nozomi into a hybrid really is. And in case any of you thought it was too fucked up to go through with. That's it. So can we just get this show on the road already?"

Around the group, everyone shrugged or nodded and stood. ~ *[But don't try and talk us out of doing our part,]* ~ Saiban said. ~ *[This fight is as much ours as it is yours.]* ~

"Fine! Fine," Ryuko groaned. "But leave her out of it!" She jammed her finger towards Nozomi, "I don't wanna hear any talk about training her, or researching her. There'll be all the time in the world for me to prepare her. When she's ready. She at least deserves to have a normal life first."

That they could all understand, and it wasn't like they would ever refuse that to a new mother. "Fair enough," Aikuro said, smirk undercutting any impression of a serious negotiation.

But the deal had been made, such as it was. Ryuko took Nozomi back into her arms, and then lead the way to the five-sided building where she would become immortal. At the doorway, Ryuko stopped, looking pensively down at her daughter.

"What's wrong? Last minute cold feet?" Aikuro asked.

"Heh, yeah, you could say that."

"Well, that's not surprising," He patted her on the shoulder.

"I was just reminding myself about how much fun it'll be to go flying with her. And like, the other cool things she'll get to do. The good side of it. Instead of how she'll be plankton trying to kill a whale," Ryuko said with a morose chuckle.

"... No!" Houka abruptly rasped. Everyone turned to watch, horrified, as he put a monumental effort into groggily lifting his arm, pressing it into the metal side of his bed and slowly lifting his torso up.

“Whoa!”

“My god! Houka stop!” Suddenly everyone was yelling, rushing over to the bed. But Shiro had been bringing up the rear and he got to Houka first. He did the exact opposite of what everyone else was going to do - put Houka’s arm over his shoulders and helped him to his limp feet.

“I... I gotta see it,” Houka said, “Please.”

“I’ve got you,” Shiro said, taking the IV stand in his other hand and slowly helping him over. Tsumugu shrugged, figuring that if Shiro was willing to risk this it must be safe enough, and took Houka’s other arm. Together they gingerly fireman-carried him over to the doorway.

When he passed Ryuko, Houka said through gritted teeth, “You’re not plankton. You’re a... a larval sea monster. We all are. We’ll grow, and grow, until we can devour The Thing Behind the Veil.” Ryuko shuddered, “Ryuko... you’re going to win! I’ve seen it! I’ve seen it with my own waking eyes!”

~~~~~

6:00am

~~~~~

Tonbo’s storm touched down in central Tokyo with an all devouring fury. Guided by Senketsu, he pushed it to gale forces beyond the bounds of any natural weather. Thunder roared continuously as the clouds converged into a vortex ripped through with lightning. Rubble, smashed cars, and chunks of masonry were unmoored from the earth. They went skidding and bouncing down the streets like poorly thrown bowling balls. Wave after wave of this supersized shrapnel raced out from the epicenter, pounding as yet undamaged buildings into dust. And yet it was nothing compared to the destructive force in the eye of the storm, where the Mankanshokus did battle.

It was a battle of dazzling light and color. In the very center Mako continued her onslaught, pursuing Minazuki relentlessly. The magenta flames of Senketsu’s empowerment stood out starkly against the tides of radiant light coming at her from all sides - from Minazuki, reflected off Mataro, refracting through trails of blood droplets, twinkling on the rain slicked pavement. Minazuki retreated, parrying as best she could though Senketsu channeled the full extent of Ryuko’s masterful offense. Whenever there was a chance Minazuki might slip away, she felt the prinkling that presaged another burst of lightning at her back, at her sides. Bolts slammed down in their dozens, momentary prison bars. There was nowhere to run.

And while Mako had her pinned, Mataro dashed in for the killing blow. He was another bolt of lightning, spiraling around them. The drifting rubble gave him cover and he disappeared behind chunks to mask his angle of approach. His own powerful glow strobed and flickered as he passed through the debris, further disorienting Minazuki. It was all she could do to block his scissors. When she did - staving off death for milliseconds more - *Steel Lightning* carved deep into her and Mako’s bat pulverized her body. But in the fountain of blood that poured out afterwards, she had her final defense. The Mankanshokus had to spring back or else be burned, and that gave her ample time to regenerate.

But she would lose. Her foes were lost to time. Mataro rode his euphoric high, oblivious to anything else but the joy of his own power. Mako and Tonbo both felt the bond with Senketsu now like it had always been there. Their emotions were his, his Ryuko’s. The thrill of glorious battle,

the righteous indignation. The certainty of fighting pure evil. It was a revelation to her. She didn't need to question or doubt anything anymore, and in that they were united. Until Mataro's booster pills wore off.

In a flash, it was all over. The pain that he'd felt on first taking two booster pills returned; a black hole in his chest, clenching his entire body into it. But only for a moment, then he blacked out mid-flight. Mako gasped and spun around immediately when she felt Wakaiketsu's power give out. **"Mataro!"** She yelled. He plummeted like a stone. Wakaiketsu's glow and reflective surfaces faded swiftly. Everything was suddenly very dark and very grey.

Mako dashed over to him the moment he landed. She completely ignored Minazuki, but Minazuki had learned by now to be wary for Senketsu was watching even when Mako wasn't. She was not stabbed in the back despite the opportunity presented. Instead she stood over Mataro, who lay facedown in the rubble. His chest heaved spasmodically and far, far too rapidly as he tried in vain to fill his lungs.

**"Mataro!"**

*[Wakaiketsu!]* Mako hurriedly flipped him over, and then scream as she saw the blood. Running down his cheeks and neck, pooling in the crater below him. It was all over her hands before she knew it. It seemed impossible there had even been that much in him.

*[No, no! I'll - I'll try to empower him!]* Senketsu gasped, *[Make his... body... hold out...!]* He spoke haltingly as he concentrated. For a moment his grip on Mako weakened, and then Mataro groaned and cried out. A feeble fountain of blood sprung from his open mouth.

"No stop!" Mako yelled. Senketsu did - it wasn't doing any good anyway. Mataro was beyond help now. He had been for several minutes, but with the power burning away it became rapidly apparent just how far gone it was. There was nothing left in him but raw, animal terror and the agony. He couldn't speak, but his eyes pleaded to Mako to please, just let it *end* ! Mako couldn't accept that though. **"It's okay,"** She murmured, fighting with every ounce of her being to just hold back tears for a moment, **"It'll be okay! You're not going to die!"** She said it not for him - he could hear nothing but a horrible, empty roaring in his ears that came with the absence of his own heartbeat. It was a desperate attempt to reassure herself.

Mako thought she'd seen the hard realities during the battle with REVOCS. Killing, taking wounds. But she never, really never thought *this* could happen! Just follow Ryuko, believe in her, everything will be alright. How could it not? But the illusion crumbled in an instant. She took his hand and squeezed. Something dropped out of its limp fingers. A handful of pills, white powder surface smeared with blood. **"What's this?"**

*[No... Just run!]* Wakaiketsu rasped. She too was dying, wilted and papery as the vital energy of Mataro's blood ran dry.

Behind Mako, the rainbow light grew. Minazuki floated slowly down to the ground a few yards behind her, peering over Mako's shoulder curiously. "Aww, and after all his fine speeches it ends in the same result!"

*It's all **her** fault!*

Mako stood slowly, turned. **"What'd you do to him?"** She growled.

“Me?” Minazuki laughed gaily and cheerfully declared, “He did it to himself! What’s that, in your hand there?” Mako unfurled her fist, “Recognize those?” At length, Mako did and her eyes went wide.

*[He’d already taken them when we arrived,]* Tonbo realized.

**“And what was I doing? Fucking *eating* !”** A horrible, foreign feeling was welling up in Mako’s chest. Twisting, hideous, and hot, it sent tremors shooting through her. It was another one of Ryuko and Senketsu’s feelings, one she’d never felt or understood before.

Rage. All consuming, blood boiling rage.

“You really thought a little rat like him could last against me without help?” Minazuki said mockingly, “None of you can. Do you see now, the price of your loyalty? He was a lamb to the slaughter, and for *what* ? For her ascension?”

**“Shut up.”** *[Shut up.] [Shut up.]*

And the sky came crashing down. Pinpoint focused around the two of them, the clouds descended rippling into a tornado of fantastically large size and power. Crumbling buildings groaned as they were wrenched upwards, drifting like leaves. The ground shook. *Good. I’ll crush her.*

Down at Mako’s feet, Mataro watched the eye of the storm close in on them but couldn’t understand it. It was getting dark, and cold. But the pain remained. There was no moment of numb peace before the end, like in the movies. It would keep going pitilessly, past the point he could withstand. Yet he kept a hand clenched around the scissors, thinking with what little was left of his brain about his final training match with Satsuki. *Just once! Cut you! Cut you! I will!* He focused every ounce of his will into moving his fingers, just an inch. Nothing.

Mako raised her bat, leveling it at Minazuki’s insouciant face. Her hair whipped into a frenzy, the whites of her eyes clenched to red, and her face was contorted by dozens of darkly shadowed brow furrows. She truly no longer looked like herself.

**“YOU BIIIIIIITCH!”** Mako roared. And the clouds whipped so fast they tore apart. The sun was just rising over the horizon behind her.

That was where they were when the world changed forever.

# Metamorphosis

## Chapter Notes

This section has been extremely challenging. Really, this entire thing which was meant to simply be the closing portion of part 2 but which has spun out to be far larger than I ever anticipated has been very challenging. I don't think I really understood just how much there was to the scenes I imagined when I started this project, and there are many things I initially planned that wouldn't have worked. Personally I don't think most pro authors would have even tried to juggle as many characters and events happening at the same time as what I'm doing here and for good reason. But then, that's why I'm not a pro author. Thanks for your patience in making it this far!

October 2068

~~~~~

6:00am

~~~~~

*This can't be happening!* Lucille thought as she watched Ryuko lead the way into the hybridization chamber. She had barely understood what she just heard, but - she thought - she knew what it meant. Ryuko unleashed. Her daughter, another monster. A prophecy to devour the stars. It meant the end of everything. In mere minutes, the last hope for REVOCS would be well and truly dead. Ryuko would rule over Earth, this hell, forever and humanity would never receive its salvation. It was coming. Her heart jumped and fell with each of Ryuko's nonchalant steps.

She'd never believed it would end like this. None of them had. Most of REVOCS had accepted that salvation was lost to them and all that was left was vengeance. But amidst the muddle of post-Honnouji REVOCS theology, it was always clear that they would have their vengeance. That much the life-fibers had promised. But Lucille was of the young generation, and in spite of everything still held onto some instinctive hope. Ragyo would come back somehow and everything would be well. After all, they were the good guys! Underdogs fighting against a world of wickedness! Things always looked darkest before the light. Didn't they?

*This can't happen,* She insisted, *The life-fibers control the universe, they determine the fates of all! This can't happen, it is ordained! Something, someone, will come along and stop them!* She watched frantically, eyes darting from one member of the kamui corps to the next as they filed in after Ryuko. Each time she thought, *Now! Something will come now!* And her panic mounted as nothing happened. *Maybe a secret weapon! Yes, any second now a satellite lazer will tear through the barrier and burn us all! Or a nuke! Or-or maybe the goddess will return! Or another kamui!* Last came Shiro and Tsumugu, helping Houka hobble along. *Or another team of couturiers, someone ! The life-fibers must have sent someone to stop this!*

And then she realized - the greatest horror of all - they had sent someone. Her.

Slipping her manacles was hard. Couturière training included escaping from various bindings and she was quite flexible, but the devices were well made. In the end it took several tries, each one with its own moment of doubt, *No, no I must not be the one destined for this. It will be someone more worthy.* But nobody came, and imagining that Nozomi's surgery could be done any second spurred her on. In the end Lucille managed to dislocate her thumbs and slip her handcuffs with only a very quiet squeak of pain. Then it was onto her ankles, trickier still, but there was a pin that could be loosened and she knew how to find it. Pressing the manacle tight with one hand, she could wiggle it out with her fingernails. And then she tottered to her feet.

Lucille crossed over to the doorway in an unsteady creep. She was weak and hungry, but more than that raw terror and adrenaline struck at her. Her heart beat a pounding dirge of doom in her head, and panic turned the cool autumn morning into a burning hell. She had no idea what she was doing, what she could possibly do to stop Nozomi's ascension, she only knew she had to do it. She made it to the doorway and leaned on it.

By this point, Ryuko and Izanami had both already noticed her. It was odd, but neither of them was going to do anything about it. Just off her scent (perfume strong enough to mask her panic-sweat) and the noise of her breathing (very heavy) Ryuko had correctly inferred the broad strokes of who she was and what she was doing there and clocked her as not a threat. Izanami was devoting all her available processing power to making sure the hybridization procedure went right, but had saved the security video of her slipping her manacles for later analysis. Lucille didn't know any of that, though. She caught her breath and took things in, rapidly forming a plan.

It all looked suitably demonic to her. The walls of the chamber were plated with smooth black electromagnetic panels. The device itself filled most of the available space - five pylons stretching about ten feet high to the ceiling, each one wound with a spool of pulsating red-orange life-fibers that fed up from vats stored deep below. Magnetic panels wrapped around them in rings, suspended by repulsive force alone, and to Lucille they seemed to imprison the life-fibers. Each pylon was capped by a piece of machinery like a winch or crane, or a hinge on a spacecraft. Between more magnet plates and sheets of gold filament, they funneled the life-fibers into long metal shafts that lead down to the cradle in the center. That was where Nozomi was. The thought made her shudder. But the thing itself was actually rather unassuming. There was a smaller spool of life-fibers encased in glass below the cradle which the five larger spools fed into, forming a tight quintuple helix shape. Above that, just a metal platform and the soft padding of a tiny infant sized little seat, rocked back. The actual surgical devices themselves - tiny and spindly things - were hidden behind a pink face and white cloth. Lucille only got a brief glimpse of that, too, because Ryuko stood in the way.

And therein lay the problem. Lucille knew what she had to do: run up, grab the baby, and yank her from the machine. Oh sure, she'd die afterward, but that much was obvious. But her only hope was that she took them all by surprise for just long enough to dart past. And Ryuko and Satsuki were standing right between the doorway and their daughter. Lucille instinctively averted her eyes from them. She would have to sidestep around them on her desperate dash, and then she would definitely be seen by the rest. They were all standing around in a rough semicircle, except for Shiro and Houka who were standing off to the left at a computer terminal. They would spot her before she was past Ryuko. Her chances seemed slim - and she was in quite insane denial about just how slim they really were. But she had to try.

She was about to spring, but at the last second she hesitated. Nozomi was crying.

Ryuko made an impatient noise "Mmph, she's crying!"

“I know, I’m sorry,” Shiro said, “We can’t put her under but she has local anesthetic, so it’s not from pain. It’ll just be a few more seconds.”

Ryuko’s only response to that was another nervous whine. And for just a moment, reality cut through the fog of Lucille’s indoctrination. That was just a baby. Ryuko was just a person. She watched Ryuko look over at Satsuki, saw the glassy, soft look of barely suppressed fear in both of their eyes. And she realized at once that they were actually quite young ladies. Glamorous and strong, but they weren’t ready for this.

*Am I really going to do this?* Lucille asked herself, *Kill an innocent baby in front of her parents? Is this really what’s right?* The moment she asked, she knew she couldn’t do it.

And then it was too late.

There was a loud electronic ding, a light on the cradle flashed green.

“I-It’s done! It worked!” Shiro said. Then he laughed, a noise that caught everyone off guard, “My god, it *WORKED* ! HAHAAHAA!” He leapt exuberantly onto Houka, throwing his arms around his shoulders - Houka staggered but leaning on the computer terminal he managed to keep his feet. “Nozomi has become a hybrid!”

Like a dam had burst, laughs and whoops and great big beaming smiles filled the room. Ryuko pulled Satsuki into her arms and kissed her deeply, then when Shiro hurried over pulled him in for a group hug. He grinned and bobbed his head, on the verge of skipping, with a childlike joy that was truly new to him. He was just the first too, as Nonon was quick to jump into the group hug too.

Lucille watched this as if from a great distance. She was utterly stunned. Just like that, it was all over. If she’d had time, she might have crashed to her knees and screamed to the heavens. But suddenly they all froze.

*\*Boom\**

A noise, no, a feeling, pulsed out and struck them all at once. A wave, at once warm and cold, hard and feather soft. It didn’t stop, but rushed out faster and exponentially stronger. And there was no question where it was coming from.

Every head turned to Nozomi. She wasn’t crying anymore. Her eyes snapped open, glowing like sapphires, and the undersides of her little shock of hair erupted in a pure, glorious white.

Every one of them, from Ryuko down to Houka (who suddenly felt neither pain nor the numbing aftershock of drugs) whirled to face Nozomi with superhuman speed. Proof to Lucille that she would never have gotten past them as they went from hugs to standing at the ready faster than she could see. Not ready for combat, so to speak, but ready for any kind of uncanniness that might occur. And they weren’t disappointed.

The feeling that hit them started off subtle enough that they each, initially, thought it was their own heart jumping with joy. After all, even after years of living immersed in the impossible world of the kamui this was still pure magic. But that was only because this sensation was alien even to them - as it mounted in intensity it became clear this was like nothing they had ever felt before.

Well, like nothing any of the humans had felt before anyway. The kamui, on the other hand, didn't find it all that foreign. Nozomi's aura had just come to life.

It was no flickering, uncertain beginning either. Nozomi's aura was flaring up exponentially larger, gaining the complexity that in maturity would become her unique fingerprint. And dazzlingly complex it was. Fractal patterns, tracings of threads and reflective crystal nimbuses trickled through their minds, a steady timelapse of winding life-fiber matrices and mysterious organelles in vigorous self-assembly. The feeling was normal to kamui, but no human was ever meant to experience it. It came through as if from a new direction, peering into their minds from somewhere inside it. In effect, it was as if it were a new thought, running on a track that didn't intrude or interrupt and yet couldn't be ignored.

Nonon was the first to respond - through Saiban's heightened senses it slapped her the hardest. She groaned and clutched at her head, "Fffuck! What... Shiro, what is this?" She wanted to fight back, kick it out, after all the last time a life-fiber entity had invaded Saiban's mind it was unquestionably hostile.

Rei staggered over, fighting against newfound vertigo. "You okay? Does it hurt?"

"Hurt?" That was an odd question. Nonon hadn't even considered it, and the moment she asked Rei wondered why she had. She knew instinctively that Nonon was afraid, bracing against what was happening. She was too, and yet it didn't hurt at all. In fact, she'd never known a feeling so purely good before - even her first synchronization with Furashada had been an overwhelming tidal force that threatened to pull her under as much as it raised her up. It was as if a great weight had lifted from her, from all of them, a weight of age that - young as they all were - they bore so lightly that they hadn't even noticed it. Now it was gone, leaving only a lovely buoyancy as they expanded, as Nozomi expanded in their minds, into a clear blue expanse. That was disconcerting. It felt as if Nozomi was not right before them in that tiny little body but all around and within them, permeating everything but just out of reach. But the most disconcerting thing of all was that they shared in the feeling, all it took was a glance between them to see that it was the same for all of them. Even Lucille - by this point they were all aware of her and felt unnervingly placid about that - knew she was part of this shared experience.

"I-I don't understand," Shiro muttered. They could all tell exactly what he was thinking. Really, it felt like they were just guessing but they knew with a certainty their guesses were right. Oh, how badly he wanted to plunge into that ocean, to dive in and go beyond the human, because that thing in the cradle was no longer human but something much, much better. He could see infinity in her twinkling eyes. But that very hypnotic effect was what made it so dangerous; anything could happen and it wouldn't do to get entranced. This was his party, everyone's safety was in his hands. But what the hell was happening? "This isn't in any of your father's notes, Ryuko," he said, "What's going on?"

Ryuko wasn't listening. No, she had dove in ahead of Shiro, of course. She was in the full force of her power, hair stiff above her head and glowing like a bonfire, hems of her clothes rippling in a wind that seemed to only exist inside everyone's heads. Her eyes were lit up from within just like her daughters, and they stared right at each other. As everyone watched, Ryuko smiled and from the crinkled corners of her eyes a few tears shimmered, drifting away into the air. "Hi," She cooed sweetly; under any other circumstances she would have been mortified to hear herself. This was just for her and Nozomi. "Hi sweetie. Nozomi. Can you see me?" She reached out, and felt with a thrilling exhilaration that it wasn't her physical hand that moved to touch Nozomi. A filament, thin and pure and made of living light, was reaching out invisibly. She was beginning to feel



herself, the whole of herself, while still in her human body and it felt effortless and so, so right. In the few feet between them there were titanic forces intermingling. “Ohhhh,” she laughed to herself, “This is amazing! Satsuki, do you feel this?” She moved to caress her daughter.

A noise like a thunderhead went off in the minds of every human and kamui present. They yelped in shock, though once again nothing remotely painful or unpleasant had occurred. *Oh fuck. We’re already deep in her world, aren’t we?* They all thought each with unique mixtures of wonder and terror.

“This is getting dangerous!” Shiro gasped, “That’s enough, it’s done. I’m decoupling the life-fiber spools now.” A thin, attenuated whine - an actual noise - floated through the air as the life-fibers continued unwinding from the five large spools and entering first into Nozomi’s cradle and then into her. The plan had been to feed her their full contents, the amount of life-fibers they had started all the kamui with. But that wasn’t exactly necessary.

“No.”

Ryuko spoke and he obeyed. He didn’t actually want to do it, anyway.

“There’s no danger,” She said, “Just...” A phrase suggested itself, something Satsuki had once said. Ryuko hadn’t been there to hear it, but she didn’t question how she knew. She threw Satsuki a sly smile and said, “Hold your tongue and watch. She’s curious, don’t you see? She’s reaching out and feeling all of us. *Let her*,” That last had the tone less of a plea than a prayer.

It was self-evidently true. But what none of them, even Ryuko, realized was that Nozomi’s new sense of touch went far, far beyond that room.

~~~~~

## “YOU BIIIIIIITCH!”

In the disaster bunkers deep below Tokyo, the ground shook. On its own that wasn’t unusual, over the last hour and twenty minutes or so the people of Tokyo had accepted that the battle had come to them. Not that it was anything to be calm about, but the typical distant dull booms and vibrations of impacts shaking the earth did nothing against the reinforced concrete of the bunker walls. The city was honeycombed with deep shafts each of which played host to dozens of stories of living quarters. Clean, organized, and cheerily brightly lit though they were, the large communal bunkrooms and mess halls (things were not grouped by family or individual as no accurate census of the city existed to sort by) instilled an apocalyptic dread into their inhabitants. Mostly because of how bare they were, how stripped of anything but the essentials for life - and how crowded.

People jammed into every one from end to end, some barely able to sit, others having at least cleared out some lanes for traffic through the rooms. Chagrined latecomers had even set up camp in the showers. Though the project had been overseen by Satsuki, with her obsessive attention and efficiency, even she had underestimated the scale of the city. Or the chaos of the evacuation. There were very few who’d managed to pack and plenty hadn’t even been home and so were trapped amidst strangers half the city away from their families and neighborhoods. At least, despite the general chaos, theft and brawls and other criminal activities were mercifully few. It wasn’t because of the government men watching over them, although police, paramedics, and aid workers were milling around constantly to try to stem the inevitable tide of emergencies. There weren’t nearly enough of them to actually enforce anything. Within the first hour, there were enough elderly and infirm people who just couldn’t take it to keep them busy all night. There had been deaths. But

these were very seldom inflicted by other people, and so the ostensible overseers of the place were kept busy.

No matter who they were, convenience store clerk or businessman, gangster or family of nine, everyone now had to come to terms with this new reality wherein the plot of floor where you stood, the meager possessions you had, and the faces around you were your entire world from now on. Maybe until the food, the water, or the air ran out. It made one reevaluate things. Strangers looked after each other's children placidly, helped wanderers who were looking for their families, and consoled those who broke down crying or screaming when it became too much for them. Makeshift communities formed, sharing whatever supplies they had, chatting and singing and putting on music to keep the spirits up. As the night wore on, it quickly became apparent that most of the leaders of these communities were among the Matoiists.

Those who truly believed in Ryuko's divinity were the ones who talked loudest and most reassuringly, and that made them natural leaders. They didn't all wear their trademark black robes (with nothing below), actually the great majority looked for all purposes like anyone else. Some of them hadn't even been Matoiists before tonight, and were as surprised at the thoughts they gave voice as their neighbors were to hear them. "This is a night of great transformation," they said, "After this disaster is over, the world will be remade! Do not fear, Ryuko and the Kamui will protect us. Look at this place! What remarkable care and foresight lead them to build this engineering marvel for us!" (nevermind that plenty of civilians in the bunkers at that moment had far more to do with their construction than Ryuko ever had) "Put your faith in them, and they will see us through this danger into a new dawn!" But as for prognostications of what that new dawn would be, there were as many ideas as there were preachers. An era of peace and prosperity the likes of which had never been known? A global crusade to enforce Ryuko's reign upon the corporate pigs? Universal oneness for all peoples, with the divisions between countries and cultures ended for good? An era of moral virtue, a return to a romanticized past under their pious Queen? Her gifts shared to one and all, bringing all of humanity transcendent glory? Whatever it was, they felt certain it would be better than anyone could possibly imagine.

But there were those who slipped off to the corners furthest from the preachers, who didn't like what they were hearing. At first it was just the inveterate malcontents but, well, all you had to do was think your self-appointed priest was a little loopy and what they were saying started to sound a bit more reasonable. "What were we thinking, letting ourselves be herded into these sardine cans? For all their talk of loving humanity, they sure haven't treated us with much dignity. And what if they lose? I know, I know, but what if? Trapped down here, we'll be slaughtered! Not much of a survival plan, you ask me. No, this is all just to spare their feelings, get us out of the way while they use our homes as a battlefield. Why? Because they don't think like regular people! What they care about is battle, I mean can you blame them? We've all watched hours of them sparring I'm sure, but it's all fun and games until it's your home they're destroying. Don't you see that to them all we are is just numbers? Yes, even to Ryuko!" The few brawls that were started were caused mostly by this kind of not-technically-treasonous talk. When the battle above the bunkers started and it became clear that the malcontents predictions were coming true, the tension only got worse. On some floors where the two sides were most polarized, shouting matches started and makeshift gangs started plotting a rush for the exits.

But then Mako's unnatural loud shriek cut through the earth and the ground shook hard enough to make everyone freeze. It was a heavy crack that set beds and tables vibrating and jumped right into the people's guts. Survival instincts kicked in and they were abruptly all too aware that they were underground. Alarms blared and red klaxons lit up along all the walls as an automated female voice said, ~ "*Attention. Extreme seismic activity detected. Please take your survival supply*

*parcel and proceed immediately to the nearest exit in an orderly fashion. Do not run. Obey all officers of the law.” ~*

And a stampede began immediately. The doors onto the elevator shafts opened to reveal huge platform elevators wide enough for a few hundred people each already swinging into position, one to each floor with dozens more loading below. Shrieking and shoving, the crowds surged towards them. Some people might have been inclined to trust the intercom, but panic spread like blood in the water and if only ten people on a floor thought the bunker was collapsing *right now*, that was enough to make everyone suspect that it could be. The camaraderie of the past hours couldn't last in the face of flying elbows and the press of bodies. Fortunately, the bunker's machinery was ready for them fast enough that only a few were outright trampled in this ugly outburst.

In the elevator shafts tall iron bar fences, smooth and essentially unclimbable, kept people from tumbling down the hundred-story pits. Police lined up along them as the elevators clunked into place and the gates went down, only to be completely disregarded. For a full minute, all across the city, it was utter pandemonium as the panicking crowd rushed past and stuffed the elevators past their (stated) maximum capacity. This, however, Satsuki had foreseen. These were military-grade constructs and their actual load limit was sufficient for an entire squadron of tanks. After an agonizingly long minute of shoving and shouting, the bars rose again and the elevators shot up and out of sight. The unified groan of outrage and despair was quelled when the next batch rose and admitted more of the crowd.

The first wave of elevators reached the surface and disgorged their passengers. This was an efficient operation, the crowd hustled into a wide entry hall as stark as the bunker interior and behind them the elevator slid off to the side to admit the next, then the next. For a moment, the front of the crowd hesitated - there was plenty of space in the hall, and it suddenly seemed like a bad idea to be too close to the doors. What was out there? They would find out, because once again the bunker decided things for them.

Sensors outside the wide doors clicked to life. The bunker entrances were built into tunnels, sometimes into old subway entrances. Where rubble had caved them in, powerful blasting charges fired. The doors swung open outwards, huge slabs of metal, and they bulldozed anything that remained clear. The early morning light and the pelting rain greeted the citizens of Tokyo as they crept out to see what had become of their city.

For many, especially on the outskirts, they found that nothing looked at all out of place. They had been spared in Mataro and Minazuki's trail of destruction. Others found the winding path the battling superhumans had taken towards the city center, a boulevard of devastation carved through otherwise healthy neighborhoods. But closer to downtown, people blinked in astonishment. It looked as though war had raged through Tokyo for months. Little remained to tell of the complex multilayered overpasses and walkways, the high towers and encrusting slums at their bases. Just the crumpled ribcages of fallen skyscrapers and the low terraces of their concrete foundations, peeking through the rubble. Some could even see (and not that far away) the lights from the other nearby bunker doors opening onto the desert.

It was staggering. Tokyo was *gone*. Its citizens wandered aimlessly through the ruins. What were they to do? The scale of the damage was superhuman. The naysayers and doubters felt sick as they realized that perhaps they had been right. And the Matoist faithful did too. Was this the beginning of the great transformation? Was the world ending?

Those lucky enough to surface at the very epicenter didn't have to wonder about that. They surfaced and beheld Mako, standing transfigured over Mataro's body, brandishing her bat at Minazuki as the air ripped apart and the ground shuddered below her. They froze right outside their tunnel entrance, paralyzed by terror and a sort of grim, awestruck acceptance. No bunker was going to save anyone from this. Better to die here witnessing the battle for Earth firsthand than be buried under a million tons of concrete and stone.

But the first ranks of citizens had only just left their tunnels when a peculiar sensation came over them. All of them. A wave of a kind of invisible force felt from within, hot and cold, hard and soft. They felt Nozomi's aura wash over them, the same way Ryuko and Satsuki and all the rest did. A few glances around told them they were all experiencing it. As if they didn't already know. One and all, they felt lightness as images rushed through a part of their minds they had never noticed before. Incomprehensible landscapes, or patterns of a sort, receding into infinite space and monumentally huge. The interiors of a vast non-euclidean labyrinth made from intricately woven crystal lattices. While outwardly, each and every one of them was just frozen in shock, inwardly they raced through this unreal world as it created itself.

Only young children (who were one and all fearlessly entranced by the new sensation) could not remember the Cocoon Sphere. It had changed everything for the entire world. Now, something else great and terrible had a hold of them. It came up so fast they couldn't scream, but the fleeting terror that it was all happening *again* raced electric through the crowds. But as the long seconds crept by, no horror came. In fact, they felt... good. Better than they had in years. As if a tremendous weight was dropping from their shoulders and the pains of daily life just slipped away. There were no needles, driving into them and sucking the very stuff of life from their guts. It was the exact opposite, as if the stuff of life itself was flowing into their very veins. A sense of exuberant, exponential growth touched every single person.

And, though they were all too busy to notice, it touched all the animals too.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!